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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

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132 PAGES OF BRAND NEW STORIES

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Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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KNOW YOUR INDIANS

True Fact Feature

By A. Hyatt Verrill

WEAPONS, MOCCASINS, HEADRESSES, ETC.

BEFORE the coming of the white men and the introduction of firearms, the most important and universal weapon of the North American tribes was the bow and arrow. These varied greatly according to the tribe. Among most of the eastern and Middle West Indians the favorite bow was of hickory, osage orange or ash, flat on both sides, fairly wide, and about four feet in length; the exact shape varied greatly. The Iroquois used bows with the hand-hold narrower than above and below, and usually with the ends somewhat recurved. For use in warfare the Wabenaki Indians of Maine used a unique double bow in which the supplementary bow doubled the power of the regular bow; some of the more southerly tribes, such as the Creeks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, etc., used long slender bows, flat on one side and rounded on the other.

The tribes of the far western plains used bows of a very different type. Wood suitable for bows was scarce until the white men left hickory wagon-bows, ox yokes, and other equipment which supplied the Indians with seasoned hickory and ash. In order to add power to their bows, the buffalo-hunting Indians bound sinews or strips of horn to their wooden bows and wrapped them with rawhide. They also made bows of horn, carefully fitted together and wrapped with rawhide, for to these tribes the power of the bow—rather than its accuracy—counted the most; and many of their bows would drive an arrow completely through a buffalo. Beyond the plains, in the Sierras and on the Pacific coast, the Indians, as a rule, used very broad, flat bows with a narrow rounded grip, and often with strongly recurved ends.

Although the arrows varied somewhat among the many tribes, the differences were mainly in the method of feathering, the form of the finger-grip, and the method of attaching the head. Some tribes used two, sometimes three feathers. Some fastened the feathers to the shaft for their full length while

[*Turn To Page* 8]

Now! The Amazing Facts about

BALDNESS

...AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

The following facts are brought to the attention of the public because of a widespread belief that nothing can be done about hair loss. This belief has no basis in medical fact. Worse, it has condemned many men and women to needless baldness by their neglect to treat certain accepted causes of hair loss.

There are six principal types of hair loss, or *alopecia*, as it is known in medical terms:

1. Alopecia from diseases of the scalp
2. Alopecia from other diseases or from an improper functioning of the body
3. Alopecia of the aged (senile baldness)
4. Alopecia areata (loss of hair in patches)
5. Alopecia of the young (premature baldness)
6. Alopecia at birth (congenital baldness)

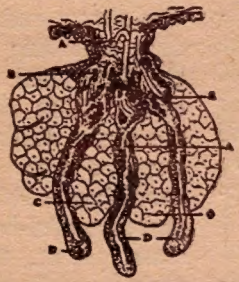
Senile, premature and congenital alopecia cannot be helped by anything now known to modern science. Alopecia from improper functioning of the body requires the advice and treatment of your family physician.

BUT MANY MEDICAL AUTHORITIES NOW BELIEVE A SPECIFIC SCALP DISEASE IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF HAIR LOSS.

This disease is called Seborrhea and can be broadly classified into two clinical forms with the following symptoms:

1. *DRY SEBORRHEA:* The hair is dry, lifeless, and without gloss. A dry flaky dandruff is usually present with accompanying itchiness. Hair loss is considerable and increases with the progress of this disease.

2. *OILY SEBORRHEA:* The hair and scalp are oily and greasy. The hair is slightly sticky to the touch and has a tendency to mat together. Dandruff takes the form of head scales. Scalp is usually itchy. Hair loss is severe with baldness as the end result.



DESTRUCTION OF HAIR FOLLICLES
Caused By Seborrhea
A — Dead hairs; B — Hair-destroying bacteria; C — Hypertrophied sebaceous glands; D — Atrophic follicles.

Many doctors agree that to NEGLECT these symptoms of DRY and OILY SEBORRHEA is to INVITE BALDNESS.

Seborrhea is believed to be caused by three germ organisms — staphylococcus albus, pityrosporum ovale, and acnes bacillus.

These germs attack the sebaceous gland causing an abnormal working of this fat gland. The hair follicle, completely surrounded by the enlarged diseased sebaceous gland, then begins to atrophy. The hair produced becomes smaller and smaller until the hair follicle dies. Baldness is the inevitable result. (See illustration.)

But seborrhea can be controlled, particularly in its early stages. The three germ organisms believed to cause seborrhea, can and should be eliminated before they destroy your normal hair growth.

A post-war development, Comate Medicinal Formula kills these three germ organisms on contact. Proof of Comate's germ-killing properties has been demonstrated in laboratory tests recently conducted by one of the leading testing laboratories in America. (Complete report on file and copies are available on request.)

When used as directed, Comate Medicinal Formula controls seborrhea—stimulates the flow of blood to the scalp—helps stop scalp itch and burn—improves the appearance of your hair and scalp—helps STOP HAIR LOSS due to seborrhea. Your hair looks more attractive and alive.

You may safely follow the example of thousands who first were skeptical, then curious, and finally decided to avail themselves of Comate Medicinal Formula.

A Few of the Many Grateful Expressions By Users of Comate Medicinal Formula

"My hair was coming out for years and I tried everything. Nothing stopped it until I tried Comate. Now my hair has stopped coming out. It looks so much thicker. My friends have noticed my hair and they all say it looks so much better." —Mrs. R.E.J., Stevenson, Ala.

"Your hair formula got rid of my dandruff; my head does not itch any more. I think it is the best of all of the formulas I have used."—E.E., Hamilton, Ohio.

"Your formula is everything you claim it to be and the first 10 days trial freed me of a very bad case of dry seborrhea." —J.E.M., Long Beach, Calif.

"I do want to say that just within five days I have obtained a great improvement in my hair. I do want to thank you and the Comate Laboratories for producing such a wonderful and amazing formula."—M.M., Johnstown, Pa.

"I have found almost instant relief. My itching has stopped with one application."—J.N., Stockton, Calif.

"My hair looks thicker, not falling out like it used to. Will not be without Comate in the house."—R.W., Lonsdale, R. I.

"I haven't had any trouble with dandruff since I started using Comate."—L.W.W., Galveston, Tex.

"This formula is everything if not more than you say it is. I am very happy with what it's doing for my hair." —T.J., Las Cruces, New Mexico

"I find it stops the itch and retards the hair fall. I am thankful for the help it has given me in regard to the terrible itchiness."—R.B.L., Philadelphia, Pa.

"The bottle of Comate I got from you has done my hair so much good. My hair has been coming out and breaking off for about 21 years. It has improved so much." —Mrs. J.E., Lisbon, Ga.

Today these benefits are available to you just as they were to these sincere men and women when they first read about Comate. If your hair is thinning, over-dry or over-oily—if you are troubled with dandruff with increasing hair loss—you may well be guided by the laboratory tests and the experience of thousands of grateful men and women.

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others attached them only at the ends. Some placed the feathers straight and parallel with the shaft, while others attached them at an angle or at a curve. Some tribes preferred a flattened finger-grip above the notch; others used arrows with the notch end slightly larger than the shaft. In order to allow the blood of a wounded creature, or a man, to flow freely the arrows were often made with grooves or shallow gutters—sometimes straight and sometimes wavy or spiral—extending the length of the shafts. This was an almost universal custom among the plains tribes.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Indians used stone, horn, bone, tooth or wooden heads to their arrows; but these were quickly discarded in favor of iron or steel, once the metals were obtainable. Another weapon r a r e l y mentioned in accounts of our Indians, but which was quite widely used was the blow-gun. These were used by practically all of the more southerly tribes, and even by the Iroquois—although, as far as is known, the Indians of the United States did not use poisoned darts, as do the Indians of tropical America. Throwing-spears, or javelins, were important weapons of many of the eastern woodland tribes; and after the plains Indians had acquired horses, the long lance became a favorite and almost universally-used weapon of warfare, as well as in hunting buffalo.

It will doubtless surprise many people to learn that our North American Indians used both the *Bolas* and the *Boomerang*. Even the tribes of New England used a form of the bolas with three round stones, enclosed in rawhide, connected by buckskin or rawhide thongs, for hunting certain kinds of game. The Indians of New Mexico and Arizona, such as the Zunis, Yumas, Pimas, Navajos, Hopis and others, used and still use, a crude type of boomerang for killing rabbits.

It is almost impossible to find a story in which Indians are mentioned that does not refer to their use of tomahawks, (the name is a corruption of the old English "Tammi-axe" or little axe). Short-handled hatchets or axes with stone heads were favorite weapons of practically all the eastern, the southern, and the middle-western tribes before the coming of the white men; and the iron or steel-headed hatchets brought by the Europeans became very widespread and popular weapons. Although the majority were plain hatchets, some were carved and cut into highly ornate forms; and combination tomahawks and pipes became common, although, as a rule, these were used only for ceremonial purposes and not as weapons.

In addition to the hatchets, or tomahawks, all of the tribes had their war clubs. These varied greatly in design. Some were mere bludgeons of heavy wood; others were of wood with a stone attached to the end by rawhide, while others had sharp stone or metal blades inserted at the striking end. In fact, the number of forms of war clubs was almost endless, for they varied not only according to the tribe but with the individual taste or ideas of the owner. With the aquisition of horses, the plains Indians' lives, customs and weapons were greatly altered to suit conditions. Although still using the short-handled-hatchet or tomahawk to some extent, they greatly preferred their own long war-clubs and long-handled, stone-headed skull-crackers. The short-handled tomahawk was effective only at close quarters, and in hand-to-hand fighting; it could not be used to split the skull of a fallen enemy as the warrior dashed by on horseback. But the four-foot wooden war-club, with its stone-weighted tip, or with sharp steel blades—or the skull-crackers with their round, or ovoid stone heads and long flexible handles of buffalo sinew or twisted rawhide—were terrible and most effective weapons, with which a warrior could bash in the head of an enemy

[*Turn To Page* 121]

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MASON SHOE MFG. COMPANY,
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You bet I want to start my own extra-income business! Please rush FREE and postpaid my Powerful Selling Outfit — featuring Mason Jackets, Air-Cushion Shoes, other fast-selling specialties — so I can start making BIG MONEY right away!

Name.....

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Age.....

Town.....State.....

Redfern twisted around and raised his gun as the rifleman approached slowly, and cautiously.

Lanier Redfern's lifelong ambition had been to become a lawyer. But now, it was apparent that his services were needed — not with his law-books, but with a gun strapped around his waist!

THE INVADING HERD

Complete Rangeland Novel by Lon Williams

LANIER REDFERN drew away from prairie dust, cattle and cowhands in what he recognized as a fateful moment in his life. Greer Haislip, ramrod of Noel Thatcher's migratory herd, loped in beside him. "Leaving us, Redfern?"

"Pretty soon, I think."

They rode together for a while, thoughtfully watching several thousand cattle, southbound from Montana to winter at their home ranch on the Brazos. They came then to an old trail that stretched like a yellow ribbon from horizon to horizon. There they drew rein, sensing a presence, like the ghost of historic years.

"This is it," said Redfern. "The Santa Fe Trail. As you know, my summer, my job and my pay end here."

"Did Thatcher pay you?"

"I'm paid in full."

Haislip extended his hard hand. "Hate to give you up, Redfern. But good luck."

"Good luck to you," Redfern responded regretfully.

Haislip swung his bronc southwestward, lifted him into a lope. He was a lean, tough ranch hand and foreman, with beef and wide open spaces in his blood. With Haislip's departure, Redfern experienced a tightness in his throat. That life which Haislip represented was passing away, for Redfern never to return.

As he watched, cattle and riders began to pass from sight, into the lowering of the land. It took them a little time, but their red backs flowed downward steadily in slanting sunlight until all were gone. Cowboys, following close, likewise lowered themselves out of sight. Then there was only dust—dust and a distant bawling of cows.

Redfern lifted bridle reins and set his course southeastward. His big sorrel tried to swing right. Redfern, too, felt a tug from that life which had been relinquished. But a pull, a spur and the force of deliberate decision kept them headed toward Radnor, a frontier town still hidden beyond a dim horizon.

A few minutes before sunset, Lanier Redfern drew rein again, this time in a flat, long-reaching valley. It was a land of tall waving grass—and an arresting whisper. Redfern listened. It was a wind that whispered—that eternal, restless wind of Western plains.

Now it was an autumn wind, blowing dry and hard, its fragrance a subtle essence of melancholy days and lands. From its impact with grass and earth a sigh lifted, to swell at times to a moan, reminicent of nothing so much as the sob of a woman in sorrow. Though Western born and bred, for the first time in his life Redfern felt the infinite sadness, the immeasurable loneliness, of the prairie wind.

What he had earlier seen at a great distance, he now viewed comparatively near at hand. To northward and eastward small groves of cottonwoods and ash dotted the valley, their patterns and gradations of size indicating they had been planted there by men—men who had come not in a body, but one by one, each in turn planting and building. Among more pretentious dwellings were sod houses and dugouts, indicia of recent settlement.

Within the nearest grove a white cottage gleamed in the long slant of sunset brightness. Second story windows blazed as yellow flame. Blades of a windmill, rising above treetops, glistened as they whirled. Listening imaginatively, Redfern fancied he could hear the clank and jar of a windmill pump.

In search of a life of his own, and a basis for new loyalties and hopes, he looked upon what he saw with misgiving, but resolutely assured himself that this was something to be desired. In expectation of becoming a friend of settlers, he sought for tolerance within himself, suppression and vanquishment of the cattleman's dislike of people who plowed and fenced the land.

Though he looked upon this dwelling in the grove as a destroyer of a deeper assurance than he had ever experienced in contemplation of unfenced ranges and branded herds of his youth. Here, he made himself believe, was part and parcel of the bone and sinew of civilization, a kind of life that endured and began the com-

AUTHENTICATION

An Act of Congress, approved February 25, 1885, declared that any inclosure of public lands without claim or color of title should be unlawful, and empowered the federal courts to abate illegal fences summarily. This Act (23 Stat. 321) authorized the use of military forces in this process of summary abatement.

The fences described in this story (that is, a fence of the same description) was held to be a violation of the Act of 1885. Although the fence was located entirely on privately-owned land, its effect was to inclose part of the public domain, the Supreme Court observing that the aim of the Act of Congress was to prevent the erection of such fences. (United States v. Camfield et al, 59 Fed. 562; affirmed, Camfield v United States, 167 U. S. 518.) — *Lon Williams*

plex institutions and luxuries of modern times.

THE MAN IN the land office had called this Refuge Valley. It was a fertile spot, where immigrant trains, overtaken by early snows, had wintered, horses and cattle feeding on the abundant grass.

Though it was called Refuge Valley, it was far from being as peaceful and settled as it seemed. There was danger here. His horse sensed it and tensed. Redfern sensed it, too, before it struck, but not soon enough to escape it completely.

A bullet cut through his shirt and seared flesh across his chest. His horse leaped at the crash of a rifle that came soon after. Shock of bullet and leap of his horse combined to fling him from his saddle.

Redfern landed flat on his back, and for seconds he lay jarred and stunned. But his senses came back. He rolled over lay face down drew his forty-five and listened. Sounds of hoofs came up from his right, where there must have been a dip or wash in the heavy earth that spread southward toward the river.

Peering through the grass, he saw a rider approach, a young man with a rifle in his hands. Guiding his horse by movements of his own body, the rider was alert for a second shot, in the event his first had failed of its purpose.

Redfern, though pained and shocked, thought coherently. Killings as he had known them had not been deeds of malice, but of necessity. The right of self-defense was nowhere questioned. Accordingly, he drew a bead on his young assailant and fired. Training in his own youth had taught him the value of accuracy. Victim of that training, the rider dropped his rifle, clutched at his left side and plunged to the ground.

Immediately Redfern rose, caught his sorrel, mounted, and rode back for a glance at his victim. He found a boy, fair and beautiful, his face to the sky. Immediately Redfern was smitten by remorse. Here, he felt intuitively a terrible mistake had been made. Observing that the boy was not dead, he shook off a stirrup to dismount, thinking that by a show of kindness he might rob death of a little of its horror for the youth as well as his own conscience of some of its pain.

An angry shout intervened. "There he is, men! He has killed the Snowden boy. Spread out and use your rifles!"

Three men had ridden up from the wash. One of them stopped his horse jerked a rifle to his shoulder and fired, seemingly without having aimed at all. The bullet clipped through Redfern's shirt where it was billowed out by wind.

Redfern did not tarry. Nor did he return the shot. Wisdom dictated flight. He bent low and gigged deep. Other men were coming into view, pushing their mounts to head him off. But he was riding a horse bred for speed as well as endurance; his sorrel leaped away, north then east Bullets went wild. The sorrel quickly outdistanced his pursuers.

Redfern saw them, one by one, give up the chase and turn back. He drew rein then, and rode on at an easy lope. Every man, he supposed, had enemies. He had a few himself. But he knew of no reason why he should have an enemy in this homesteaders' country. The only explanation he could think of sprang from his original impression—that there had been a terrible mistake. Those farmers back there evidently had mistaken him for another, possibly some drygulcher who had deserved to be killed.

But he could not go back and explain. Not with the Snowden boy lying on his back in the grass, possibly dead by now. And what the incident in the tall grass would do to his own plans for the future required no particular astuteness to foresee. Here or in Radnor, he would be an outcast from the beginning, a killer who could never live down this tragedy he had brought to Refuge Valley. This was going to be homesteaders' country. Whatever he undertook to do for himself, he could never succeed in an atmosphere of certain hostility.

Accordingly, as he rode onward, it was a feeling of futility. But after a time his thoughts reverted again to his first explanation; there had been a mistake. And since there had been a mistake, running away from it was

not the courageous thing a man would like to do. A man of courage would stay and redeem himself.

At sunset he came to a possible answer, at least in part, to his puzzle. He had hit into a wagon trail that ran southeastward. He had turned into this, expecting to ride into town shortly after nightfall.

Instead, at dusk he rode into a barrier. A barbed-wire fence had recently been erected across the road. Not only across the road, but also across the valley, from north to south as far as he could see in the dim light. Its posts were new. Its wires were new, and there was no gate in the fence at the place where it crossed the Radnor road.

Well, he said to himself, *this isn't the first time.*

He swung down, found a pair of fence pliers in his warbags and proceeded to remove a staple.

A voice came harsh and threatening from a grass hideout beyond the fence. "I wouldn't do that, mister, if I was you."

REDFERN had seen nobody until then. The man raised himself to his knees, a shotgun in his hands aimed at Redfern's stomach.

"Hold steady there, stranger," said Redfern. He backed a step and withdrew his wire cutters. "What's going on here anyhow? An hour ago a bunch of farmers gunned me out of their country. Now I find myself fenced in. If I can neither stay in nor get out, what am I going to do?"

The guard rose to his feet. "Offhand, I'd say that's your worry. What are you doing in this valley?"

"Right now I'm trying to get out."

"Well, take my advice and don't try any more. This fence is ten miles long, north and south."

"Oh a drift fence, eh?"

"No, mister, she ain't no drift fence."

"I came from northwest. There's no fence in that direction."

"Not yet. But in a few days there'll sure be a fence, eighteen miles long."

Redfern was puzzled. His eyes were fixed upon the stocky, bearded fellow, who looked sinister as night gathered round him. He kept the shotgun trained on Redfern, stood his ground and waited.

"Sounds like you might be fencing in a chunk of Refuge Valley," Redfern said, guessing his adversary would talk, to brag if for no other reason.

"That's it exactly," returned the other. "And if you want to get out of there, you can go back the way you come. It's my advice you do that, unless you're looking for trouble."

"Troubles come last in what I'm looking for," Redfern assured him. He backed away and mounted his horse.

The guard leaned to one side and spat. "If you're thinking of trying to cut through somewhere else, you can give that up, too. There's a guard every quarter mile or so, and he's got orders to shoot anybody who pulls a staple or cuts a wire."

"Thanks for telling me, mister. And just because I'm a curious sort, who's your boss?"

"You ought to know that, unless you're a complete stranger hereabouts."

"I'll make a guess. You're working for Travis Hardin."

"Not a bad guess."

"Now suppose I told you I'm a drifting cowboy looking for a job, would you let me through?"

"Stranger, I wouldn't let you through, no matter who you are. Besides, I'm beginning to get suspicious of your intentions. You better high-tail before my nervous finger gets out of control."

"Thanks again," Redfern said discreetly. He swung his sorrel and rode back the way he had come.

But he had gone only a short distance when he heard riders approaching from the west. He was caught then, between two perils, each ready to take his life and deem it a pleasure to do so.

He swung south in time to escape being seen. Along the trail he had left, a score of riders pounded in the dark. He could see them only as vague shadows as they drew up at the fence.

A gruff voice, one he recognized as that of the leader who had given orders for his capture back in the valley, commanded roughly, "All right, Sam, cut the wire."

The surly voice of the guard responded promptly, "Touch that wire and you'll die."

Redfern held his breath, waiting for what he regarded as inexorable. It came without delay. A volley of flame and thunder filled the darkness with its fury.

The gruff voice repeated its command. "Cut it, Sam."

In a moment Redfern heard repeated pings of taut wire being cut, strand by strand.

"Now Shivers, ride to town and get that medico out here. Tell Doc Bilbro it's Mary Snowden's boy that's

been shot. When he hears that, he'll come in spite of hell. We'll string out along the road and make sure he'll have protection. You tell him so."

Redfern heard a rider detach himself from the group and head for town. A moment later, from a point by the fence farther south, a second horse loped away in the same direction.

This second rider, Redfern surmised, was another fence guard, this one no doubt leaving his post to spread news of the killing at the barricaded road.

Redfern rode to the spot that had been deserted. Nobody challenged him when he dismounted and cut the wires.

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REDFERN FELT the descending chill of the prairie. Even in summer, cold settled at night upon the open plains. In autumn, temperatures after dark had the bite of winter. Hence, by the time he had reached Radnor, Redfern was shivering.

But he had an additional reason for stopping outside of town and removing a leather jacket from his saddle roll. Blood had stained his shirt an incriminating circumstance he considered best to conceal.

In Radnor a few minutes later, he hitched his sorrel in front of Hiram Shackford's hardware store, avoided saloons, and strolled along the town's main street in search of a doctor's signboard. Presently he came upon one. It read, *Jefferson Bilbro, M. D.*

Redfern entered an office lighted by a kerosene lamp and unexpectedly found a stranger waiting there. He checked an expression of surprise nodded. "Howdy, neighbor."

"Same to you," said the other.

Guardedly, the men measured each other. Redfern recognized his opposite number as a sodbuster, probably the man Shivers from Refuge Valley. He wore a mustache, shaggy hair that hung low under a small black hat, jeans trousers, a black coat and flat-heeled shoes. Redfern himself was a slim, tough cowboy in high-heeled boot, corduroy trousers, leather vest, and a gray Stetson. His twenty-five years had not brought him to what he regarded as the mustache age, but like maturer men of the cattle country, he wore his sandy hair heavy at the ears and down to his neck at the back. Both men were tanned to hardness by wind and sun.

"Waiting for the doctor?" Redfern asked.

"Sort of."

"Sort of wanted to see him myself."

"He's up the street a ways. A new baby, I hear. Bad time to be needing a doctor, what with a baby being born and a boy dying out in the valley."

Redfern knew a variety of ways for avoiding a direct answer. One was by evasion. "In my wanderings," he said, "I've observed that when a young fellow gets in need of a doctor, it's usually because something happened to him. Like getting kicked by a horse, for instance."

"You're a drifter, eh?"

Redfern sat down. "That's about it. Lanier Redfern's the name."

"I'm Tim Shivers. You didn't happen to be drifting through Refuge Valley about sundown, I reckon?"

"Now, I wonder why you asked me that?" countered Redfern.

"Well, I'll tell you why," Shiver answered curtly. "About sundown a stranger who rode a fast sorrel gunned this Snowden boy off his horse."

Redfern maintained outward calm. "Drygulcher, eh?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then you mean it was a gunfight."

"I didn't say that either."

They heard footsteps outside. A moment later Dr. Bilbro strode in. He

was a big, hefty man of fifty-odd years, clean-shaved and gray-eyed. He dropped his satchel and hat onto a table, looked at first one, then the other of his callers.

"What do you men want?"

Redfern nodded toward Tim Shivers. "This man's first. I merely wanted a bottle of healing oil. Horse got cut on barbed wire this morning."

Shelves of medicine bottles indicated that Jeff Bilbro was doctor and druggest for Radnor. He took down a small, labeled bottle of amber-colored liquid and handed it to Redfern. "Antiseptic and healing. Fifty cents."

Redfern paid and took the bottle. "Sure thank you, Doc."

The doctor turned promptly to Shivers. "Now you?"

Tim Shivers was hesitant. "Well, Doc, this is asking plenty, but you're wanted in Refuge Valley. A boy has been shot."

"Another? Only yesterday, they tell me, a settler was murdered out there. And, if you want to know, it's hinted around town that one of Travis Hardin's gunnies did it. Rumor is, Hardin wants to provoke the settlers into a fight, so he can wipe them out. Who is it this time?"

Shivers fixed his eyes on the doctor. "This time it's the widow Snowden's boy."

BILBRO'S shoulders jerked slightly. This, patently, was more than mere information to him. His voice suggested hurt and deep, smoldering anger. "Who shot him?"

"We don't know, Doc. It could have been one of Hardin's hired killers. It could have been some drifter." He glanced at Redfern, then at Bilbro. "You can bet we would like to know which. But the boy's bad hurt."

Dr. Bilbro looked thoughtfully at his hat and medicine satchel, then at Shivers. "Tim, you're asking a lot of me this time. Everybody here in town knows about Hardin's high-handed doings and gunmen he's hired to back him up. You're being fenced in, out in Refuge Valley. How did you get through?"

"We cut the fence," said Shivers.

"Which means you had to kill one of Hardin's guards; maybe more than one."

Shivers remained silent.

"And by killing a guard," Bilbro added, "you're playing right into Hardin's hands. Nothing would suit him better than being able to say you settlers started the killing." He walked back and forth, studying. He stopped. "I've never turned down a reasonable call in all my practicing years, but this is asking me to ride into a hornet's nest."

"It's tough," Shivers agreed. "Mary Snowden and Isabel are going to have a hard enough time, trying to get along for a month or two. If Hugh dies, I'm afraid they won't be able to manage at all. But, of course, that's not your worry, Doc."

Jefferson Bilbro faced him indignantly. "Now, look here, Tim, how do you know that's not my worry?"

Shivers took off his battered hat and twirled it round a finger. "Sorry, Doc. Now, if you decide to go, Caleb Wardell says there'll be at least twenty men along the route to see that you get through."

The big medic took surgical instruments from a cabinet, wrapped them in a clean towel, and dropped them into his satchel. He jerked his grayish, shaggy head and pulled on his hat.

"Get going, Tim. Travis Hardin's got no right to stand in the way of a doctor. Let him try an outrageous thing like that, and we'll drive him out of this country."

Redfern had listened as unobtrusively as he could manage. He went out with them. "Doc, if I can be of any help, let me know."

"What can you do, stranger?"

"My name's Redfern," Lanier answered. "I'm not bad as a cowhand."

"I don't reckon a cowhand is what's needed right now."

"I'd be a pretty good chore boy, too," Redfern added quickly.

"That's more like it. I'll mention you to Mary Snowden, if I don't forget. She might use you."

Dr. Bilbro's buggy and horse stood at a hitch-rail. Redfern loosed the tie rein and fastened it up. "Good luck, Doc."

The doctor climbed into his buggy and backed into a turn. "Tim, you ride on and tell the folks I'm on my way. Have those homesteaders who are waiting for me go home. I don't want any killings. If I can't talk my way through, I'll turn around." Shivers' attempt to protest was brushed aside. "On your way, Tim."

Tim Shivers lifted his horse into a lope and headed west. Hailed only by settlers strung along the route, he rode straight to the Snowden house. Several horses and a few teams with buckboards were ranged along the yard fence. Shivers dismounted, hitched, and hurried in. Men and women in the livingroom faced him unexpectantly.

"Doc's on his way," he informed them at once.

Their worried faces lighted with hope.

A dark-haired woman came from an adjoining room. She was handsome and tall, about forty years of age. Though her countenance was filled with anxiety, it was apparent that she did not lack for courage. "Did you say the doctor is coming?" she asked.

"Yes, Mary. He ought to be here any minute."

Mary Snowden sighed gratefully.

Seconds later they heard the approach of numerous horses, attended by a sound of buggy wheels.

Mary herself opened the door. "Jeff," she said, a sob escaping her throat. "It was asking a lot of you, I know, but I'm so glad you've come."

Jeff Bilbro tramped in and tossed his hat over a peg beside the door. "Glad to come, Mary. Just sorry it had to be for something like this. Where is he?"

Mary showed him into a bedroom.

He appraised the situation critically. Five women were in the room. "Everybody out," he said brusquely. The women rose. Among them was one about twenty years, a dark-haired, blue-eyed girl who resembled Mary Snowden.

"Isabel," the doctor said, "you better stay with Mary and me. We may need your help."

"Thank you, Doctor," the girl responded in a gentle contralto voice.

HE CLOSED the door when the others had gone out. He turned and gave the situation a moment's study. Light spread dimly from a kerosene lamp on a dresser. On a stand in a corner were water pitcher, basin and towels. The doctor nodded to himself, put his satchel on the dresser and took off his coat. He rolled up his sleeves, washed his hands in a disinfectant and dried them on a clean towel.

He stood by the bed then.

Hugh Snowden lay on his back, face drawn with pain, his eyes closed. His head moved slowly.

The doctor nodded to Mary Snowden. "Turn back the covers. Isabel, bring the lamp."

Mary turned down the quilts and sheet. Hugh's clothes had been removed and a night shirt put on in their stead. Noting this, Jeff glanced at Mary. Here was an example of pioneer

resourcefulness and nerve that did not escape his admiration.

Mary opened Hugh's shirt and moved it aside. A bloody pad and a bandage were revealed. "The bullet," said Mary, "went all the way through."

The doctor nodded. "That's something in his favor." He brought his satchel and set it on the bed. "Isabel, hand the lamp to Mary. I've got another job for you."

The lamp was passed.

Hugh Snowden opened his eyes and stared at them. "What's going on here?"

Isabel stood over him. "It's the doctor, Hugh. He's going to fix you up."

Hugh groaned as his mind emerged from unconsciousness. He stared anxiously, almost beechingly at Dr. Bilbro. "Have I got a chance, Doc?"

"Sure, sure," said the doctor. "But you've got to take orders. You won't come out of this by being a baby."

"I'm no baby. What do you want me to do?"

"We're going to dress your wound, Hugh. It will hurt a little, but we can make it easier for you." He wet loose cotton with chloroform and handed it to Isabel. "Have him breathe through that."

"I can take it, Doc; I said I was no baby."

"That's all right with me, young man."

"You go ahead, Doc."

Isabel sat by the bed and held the cotton. At a nod from Bilbro, she eased it up to where Hugh breathed its fumes. The doctor cut away the bandage, removed the bloody pad. With carbolic acid solution, he washed the space around the bullet wound, being careful not to touch the raw flesh. He glanced at Isabel, nodded for her to place the cotton closer.

Isabel eased it up, gradually covered Hugh's nose with it.

Unhurriedly Bilbro wrapped a probe with dry, sterilized cotton. He touched it to the raw flesh, at first gently. Then, taking a firm grip, he inserted the probe into the wound, turned it slowly round and round as he forced it inward to a depth of about two inches. After a moment he withdrew it in the manner, giving the hole time to close behind it before withdrawing the probe completely. The bullet had entered just below and to the left of the midriff and ranged upward. Jeff's face was grave as he proceeded.

For reasons he did not explain, he plugged the hole with cotton covered with a thick salve. Over that he placed a gauze pad, which he fastened down tightly with adhesive tape.

He looked at Mary. "Put down the lamp and turn him over." He nodded to Isabel. "Turn his head to one side. Keep him breathing the chloroform."

On the boy's back was a second pad, larger and bloodier than the other. The doctor continued his work, proceeding as before, methodically, expertly. Within a half-hour the surgery was done, and the patient was on his back again, breathing steadily.

Jeff Bilbro put away his materials, drew on his coat and sat down to rest a while. Mary put the lamp on the dresser and seated herself nearby. Isabel remained by the bed, her eyes on Hugh, who was sleeping. Jeff studied both women by turns. They were steady people, a good looking daughter and her beautiful mother. Mary Snowden and her husband had been among the first homesteaders; they had come West for Vance Snowden's health. Bilbro was a childless widower.

Jeff looked at his hands, then at Mary. "You want to know the truth, don't you?"

She paled slightly, but nodded. "I know it's bad, Jeff."

"That's just what it is, Mary. The bullet ranged up, barely missed his left lung, I believe. But he's got a chance. It's a slim one though, and the way I see it, nobody but you has got the nerve and patience it will take to bring him through."

"I shall do all I can."

"It means you will have to give up your school."

"That will be a sacrifice to make."

JEFF BILBRO knew better than that. It had been Mary's small teaching salary that paid doctor bills and raised her two children. With Hugh now on his back, possibly for months, she would need hired help. Neighbors would do what they could, of course, but they would have their own work to do. There would be times, too, when they would be snowed in for days even for weeks.

Bilbro was thinking of the drifter named Redfern. He glanced at Isabel, aware of the sweet loneliness of her, the love she could give, the depth to which she could easily be hurt. His attention shifted to her mother. "Mary, you're going to need a hired man for a while. I was just thinking this; maybe the school committee would agree to let Isabel teach in your place. With Isabel teaching and with a hired man to substitute for Hugh, you should be able to make it all right."

Mary's hands were folded in her lap. She studied them a moment then looked hopefully at Dr. Bilbro. "Jeff, would you speak to the committee for me? Most of them are in the living room now."

"Sure, Mary. Glad to."

"But about the hired man— Well, you know that no such person could be found around here."

Bilbro took out a pipe, stared at it thoughtfully and put it back in his pocket. "I reckon it's only a coincidence, but there's a man in town looking for a job. Name's Redfern. I can't recommend him except on looks, because he's a complete stranger to me. He's slim; above average height; about twenty-five years old; fine looking; healthy." Jeff glanced at Isabel, noted that she was attentively quiet.

He got up and felt of Hugh's pulse. "Heart's as strong as an ox," he said, looking at Mary.

Mary's voice trembled, a result, thought Bilbro, of relaxing tension. "You know, Jeff, I have a feeling suddenly that Hugh will get well. There's no explanation—the feeling just came to me, like a promise."

"That's the kind of feeling to have," Bilbro told her. He sat down. "What do you know about this shooting?" he asked. "Nobody's told me much about it."

Mary Snowden was hesitant. He could see that her answer was going to demand both nerve and honesty.

"Jeff, I shall confess, though it hurts to do so, that Hugh was the aggressor. But it was because of a mistake, that much I can say in extenuation. Yesterday late, Harve Chapman, a homesteader, was killed by an unknown gunman down by the river. It was murder, for Harve was unarmed; he was merely bringing in some of his cattle which had strayed. The murder infuriated our menfolks who, naturally I suppose, charged the killing to Travis Hardin and his hirelings. After that, our men set out to kill any stranger who showed up in the valley, on the mistaken assumption that nobody except Hardin men would be showing. I did what I could to dissuade them, but they wouldn't listen to me. Hugh was as hot-headed as the rest. Then there was the stranger. I'm sorry to say it, Jeff, but Hugh shot first; the men with him have

admitted as much. Not only that, the man Hugh shot at was doing nothing to anybody. Apparently the stranger, too, was hit; he fell from his horse. But he was able to fight back, which he did as Hugh rode toward him. There, Jeff, is a mother's reluctant statement of the truth."

"You're a brave, honest woman, Mary." Bilbro drew a hand across his forehead. During Mary's narrative he had remembered the man Redfern—remembered, also, a streak of blood below the man's jacket, the healing oil the man had bought, the jacket itself, buttoned high, as if to conceal something. Those circumstances pointed to but one conclusion—Redfern was the drifter who had shot Hugh Snowden.

He rose to go, then resumed his seat. "Isabel, I wonder if you'd fetch me a cup of coffee? It's right chilly outside. Nothing like coffee to warm a man's bones."

"Of course, Doctor," Isabel responded quickly.

He waited until she had gone out. "Mary," he said awkwardly then, "from what I hear in town, there's going to be trouble for you people here before many days. If you would consent to move to town—"

"No, Jeff. Don't say any more. You're as fine a man as could be, but we belong in Refuge Valley."

Jeff took the refusal silently.

Isabel returned with coffee, cream and sugar. She poured for Bilbro and Mary. While they drank, she sat by the bed, looking at her brother. Jeff Bilbro understood then what Mary had in mind. Here in this house was where the ties of love held fast. Isabel's love for Hugh was something a person could almost touch, it was so real. And Mary Snowden lived only for her children.

He drained his cup and picked up his belongings.

THE LIVING room was crowded with men and women, waiting for his report. He looked them over with a stern sort of sympathy, wondered vaguely how many of them would be killed before a year was out.

A bearded man who stood a head higher than most of the others, was spokesman. "How is he, Doc?"

Caleb Wardell was a born leader; that was obvious at a glance. But his kind of leadership was going to mean fighting and killing. Bilbro gave him a hard look. "Hugh's got a slim chance, Caleb, but mighty slim. He may make it, with such a fine, steady mother to take care of him. It means she will have to give up the school—"

"Oh, no," the women protested.

"But I have a suggestion," he added. "Caleb, you are school committee chairman. Maybe you could arrange for Isabel to substitute for her mother for a month or so?"

"Why, of course, Doc." Caleb glanced from one committee member to another. "Anybody got objections to that?"

"No, sir," they replied emphatically.

"All right, Doc, it's settled."

"Good enough."

Bilbro went out, paused at the gate and glanced at the starry sky. A crowd of men had followed.

Caleb Wardell said, "We'll see you back to town, Doc."

"No, Caleb. I'll go alone. Travis Hardin knows I'm the only sawbones within a hundred miles. He knows, also, that he himself may need my services. You can depend on it, I won't be molested. Besides," he continued with firm admonition, "you men are getting off to a bad start, in my opinion. Hardin, from what hints I hear, is hoping you'll go on the war path. He wants to clean out this valley. A good way to do it, from his viewpoint, would be to make life unbearable for the settlers. My advice, for what it is worth, is that you put away your guns; otherwise, he'll wipe you out."

There were mutterings of disagreement, but they let him depart alone.

Jeff Bilbro, despite his show of confidence, had misgivings. Yet it turned out as he had predicted. He passed through where the wire had been cut

from the road. He saw shadowy forms of lurking men, but he heard no sound, except the noise of wheels, the rhythmic thud of his horse's hoofs, and the sigh and moan of the lonesome prairie wind.

3

LANIER REDFERN waited outside Dr. Bilbro's office the following morning. Radnor's main street was a scene of dust and noisy activity—horse teams jangling by at a trot; wagons loaded with fence posts and barbed wire; horseback riders, shouting roughly to one another, guns at their hips; workmen with posthole diggers, shovels, rifles; a buckboard with surveyors and their equipment. All were rumbling, shouting, pounding westward, toward Refuge Valley.

Jeff Bilbro dodged through traffic and crossed the street. "Morning, Redfern."

"Good morning, Doc."

A curious eye on Redfern, Bilbro inserted a key in his door lock. "You look feverish, Redfern. That horse of yours must have been cut pretty bad, to affect you like that."

Redfern countered with a grin. "I didn't think you were being fooled, Doc. Truth is, I need medical attention. Pretty bad, I guess."

They went in and passed to a back room. Redfern removed his jacket and shirt. Underneath was a crude dressing he had made for himself.

"Onto that table," said Bilbro.

Redfern lay down, face up, and Bilbro removed his dressing.

"You should have had this attended to last night," he said with professional anger. "You've got a bad gash across your front. Inflamed, too. Hugh Snowden's rifle did that, unless I'm a bad guesser."

Redfern winced at a gentle touch that felt like unnecessary roughness. "You guessed right, Doc. There was a hard cross-wind, but not so hard as it seemed. It fooled Snowden. If he hadn't allowed a couple of inches too much for wind-drift, I'd now be what you medics call a cadaver."

Jeff Bilbro looked at his patient's face, frowned and went on with his work. "You impress me as taking this episode too lightly, young man. You came near being killed. In return, you shot Mary Snowden's only son. He'll probably die, too. Maybe you wild buckaroos can look upon death with indifference, even grin about it, but not these homesteaders. They take matters seriously. Which is a good thing. It's living people, not dead ones, who will make this land prosper. What are you doing here anyhow?"

"Looking for a job, Doc."

"You're not fooling me, young man. I know a drifter when I see one. Travis Hardin's gang is lousy with them. You came here for a solid purpose. You talk like a man who has been to school. Maybe you're a Government man?"

"I've got no secrets, Doc." Redfern flinched, grimaced. "Ouch!"

"Sort of tender-skinned, aren't you?"

"Well, I'm not an Indian. But you go right ahead, Doc. Pay no attention to my grunts. As for my business here—ouch! I reckon you won't believe it, but I came here to live."

"Where you from?"

"Up Cheyenne way. By birth, experience and preference, I'm a cattleman. My dad owned a fine herd in Wyoming, but he sold out and retired when setttlers began to crowd him off his range. He was from a New England family of scholarly folks. That's why he sent me to school every winter. He foresaw an end to open ranges and figured I'd better learn a trade or a profession."

"What is your profession?"

"Doc, you're awfully nosy. But I'll tell you—I'm a lawyer."

Jeff Bilbro grunted. "As a lawyer in this town, you'd starve. Travis Hardin

is the law here, and his law is something mighty different from yours."

"That's an old story," Redfern said, suddenly serious. "Some individual with money enough to hire killers is always the law. That is, until he runs into a stone wall, or stops a bullet. But I'm not here to tie in with Hardin. I've got entry papers on a quarter-section in Refuge Valley. I'm going to homestead some land, Doc. I figure that land—the kind you've got title to—is the dependable, enduring wealth of this Western country."

"I figure you've got sense, Redfern."

"Under our homestead laws, a man can absent himself from his land five months out of the year. Which means that during winter months I can stay in town, if I wish, and be getting my start as a lawyer." Redfern relaxed as Bilbro's rough treatment let up. He added on a note of anxiety, "But right now I've got a debt to pay."

Bilbro stepped back and eyed him reproachfully. "I've heard statements like that before. Maybe I'm getting you wrong, but this country has seen too many men who had debts to pay."

Redfern sat up, slid off the table, and put on his shirt. "This is not the kind of debt you're thinking about. This one is a debt I owe Mrs. Snowden."

Bilbro stiffened. "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going to work for her. Despite your skepticism, I've got a conscience. Way I figure, Hugh and I were both a little fast on the trigger. He's in no shape to make good his mistake, but there's no reason why I can't do something about mine."

The doctor began to tidy up. "How do you know you can work for Mary Snowden? I reckon she will have something to say about that."

Redfern put on his jacket and adjusted his gunbelt. "You have the answer to that, Doc. You can take me out there and get the job for me. You can tell the lady I'll work for board and keep, until her son is up and around."

"Do you think Mary Snowden would let you in her house, knowing you'd shot her boy?"

"Would you have to tell her?"

"Well, no, I reckon not." Bilbro fastened a cabinet door. "Just a minute," he said, as his front door opened and closed.

A MOMENT later a blocky-faced redheaded man of about thirty stood before them. His face was flushed, raw-boned and hard, his voice flinty. "Well, sawbones, you made it there and back last night, but don't presume on my good nature too much."

Now, you look here, Travis Hardin, you can't interfere with a doctor's work. When people are sick, they've got to have a doctor."

"Even if they have to kill one of my

men in order to get a medic, I suppose. Well, Doc, you can make a note of this. I meant to be law abiding and peaceable but those nesters seem to have different ideas. Well, they started something when they murdered my fence guard."

"But you put the fence across their road, don't forget that."

Redfern eased forward. "Hold it, Doc. You're talking to a range thief and killer."

Eyes of the younger men met in tenseness and hair-trigger hostility. "Well, Redfern, it's you again."

"Now, Doc won't understand that remark," said Redfern, a chilly sort of gaiety in his voice. "What Hardin means is, that next time we meet will be our last. We had our first meeting in a little town in Wyoming. Hardin had herded his beef onto my dad's hay land. It was a fist fight then, Doc, and I most disrespectfully beat Hardin's daylights out. In front of his men, at that—not to mention his girl-friend of the moment. Hardin said we'd settle it with guns next time."

Bilbro stood nervously between them. "Well, you can both forget that threat. We don't want any killings in this town. Get out of my office, Hardin. This is a doctor's office, and I'll see that it stays one."

"In just one second," Hardin responded with cold insolence. "I dropped in to warn you to stay away from Refuge Valley. As I said, I meant to be peaceable. But any more fence cutting or killing of my hired hands will mean a fight that will make widows of a lot of nesters."

Jeff Bilbro showed a courage that impressed Redfern as foolhardy. "Let me tell you something, Hardin. Heretofore I've answered the calls of the sick. I intend to do that right on. That goes for Refuge Valley, fence or no fence. If you put another wire across that road, I'll cut it. Do you understand?"

"Another thing," said Redfern. "It happens that I am a homesteader in Refuge Valley myself. I expect to come and go, as and when I please."

Hardin's eyes narrowed. "You make the issue pretty clear, Redfern. If you want to side with nesters, that will suit me fine. You can expect a showdown, too. In about a week, I'll have my fence completed. When that's done, I'm turning about six thousand head of cattle into Refuge Valley. I'll also have plenty of men to protect them. There may be trouble. I wouldn't be at all surprised to see plenty of it. But if things go from bad to worse, you can just remember this—the nesters started it."

Hardin turned and strode out.

"I guess you heard that," said Bilbro. He had a troubled, defeated look.

"I heard it," Redfern replied gravely. "Hardin is playing it right cleverly, too, making it appear that he's being driven to violence by a nest of bloodthirsty homesteaders. But he's mean Doc. He inherited a pile of money, as well as cattle, from a dad who was even meaner than he. My guess is, there'll be plenty of trouble, and it won't be long coming."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"Do?" Redfern grinned. "We're going to Refuge Valley."

WHEN THEY came to Hardin's fence, they found it had not been repaired. Redfern rode up close behind Bilbro's buggy. "Don't let this fool you, Doc. Hardin is not ready to close in yet. Take a glimpse out north."

Five or six miles away they saw teams and wagons strung out in a long east-west line. "I'm afraid you're right," Bilbro called back. "What I don't understand is, how can he do it?"

"I'm not so sure that I understand it either," said Redfern. "But you can count on one thing; when he gets his herd down from Montana, he'll have men enough—gunmen, I mean— to make it stick."

"Looks to me like work of a dirty, overbearing scoundrel," declared Bilbro.

Redfern grinned. "We see eye to eye on that, Doc, but fence-building goes right on, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, so it does," said Bilbro in disgust. When they had gone on a few miles, Bilbro stopped. "I just thought of something," he said, as Redfern pulled alongside. "That ointment I put on you is the same kind I put on Hugh Snowden. Mary and her daughter will be curious about that. You better let me wrap up one of your fingers, just to head off suspicion."

"Whatever you say, Doc. Want to do it right here?"

"No better place, young man."

Redfern swung down. "You know the Snowdens pretty well, don't you?"

The hefty doctor gave Redfern a sour look. "That's none of your particular affair, is it?"

"You've been right nosy about my business, haven't you?"

"Maybe I had a reason." He applied ointment to Redfern's left middle finger and wrapped it loosely. "There, now. If you're careful, they won't think a thing about it." He glared at Redfern and added, "Since you're so nosy about my acquaintance with the Snowdens, I'll tell you something. If you cause them any more trouble, I'll gun you down myself. I know the Snowdens that well."

Redfern's lips turned up in a smile. He swung onto his horse. "You sound romantic, Doc. The widow Snowden must be right good looking. And this daughter of hers—what about her?"

"That's something you can find out for yourself," Bilbro answered shortly.

While still a mile off they could see the Snowden house and the yard fence, shining white. The vehicles and saddle horses Bilbro had seen there the night before, were gone.

Redfern regarded the quiet, deserted look of the place as a good omen. He was riding his sorrel. Though he had changed clothes and shaped his hat differently, he had no way of changing the appearance of his horse. Some of those homesteaders who had tried to kill him, would likely remember this big sorrel, if they saw him again.

MARY SNOWDEN came out while Bilbro and Redfern were hitching their horses by the fence. Redfern glanced at the medic and at the woman. It was no wonder, he thought, that Jeff Bilbro felt friendly toward the Snowdens. Here was good looks, if ever Redfern had seen any.

Bilbro tipped his hat. "Morning, Mary."

"Jeff," said Mary, "Hugh had a good night, and I feel so grateful. I still have faith that he's going to make it." She glanced interestedly at Redfern who stood, hat in hand, waiting to be introduced.

"Oh, yes," Bilbro said. "Mary, this is that Redfern fellow I mentioned last night. He's not exactly looking for a job. Fact is, he's a homesteader. Lawyer, too. That is, he expects to be sometime. Right now he offers what looks like an arrangement for your mutual benefit. That is, he'll take a job temporarily. I suggest you hire him for the winter, if you can get him."

Mary gave him an appraisal, unbiased by either sentiment or hostility. Yet in the secret background of her thoughts was her daughter Isabel. Isabel's proximity to this handsome stranger would turn her head, Possibly break her heart, too. "I don't know," Mary said. "We've never kept hired help. And right now, though we could use a man certainly, we could better afford to do our own work. I'm sorry—"

"You don't need to think about what you can afford," said Redfern. "Just say you can use me. What with my homesteading project, having a place to eat and sleep for a few months would tip the scales in my favor, not yours. If you don't have a spare room in the house, I can sleep in the barn. I'm used to outdoors."

"Oh, but we have a spare room. I wasn't thinking of that so much as—"

"Mary, he's hired," said Bilbro. "Now, Redfern, bring in your saddle

roll and warbags. Mary will show you where you'll sleep. Then you can put up your horse and get to work."

"But, Jeff—"

"I'll be responsible for this, Mary," said Bilbro. "Show Redfern to his room, while I have a look at the sick boy."

Mary showed him to a room upstairs on the northwest corner. It was furnished with a single bed, dresser, kerosene heating stove, washstand with water pitcher and bowl, one chair, a built-in wardrobe. From a north window he saw homesteads scattered distantly over the flat land, young trees, barns, cottages, sod houses; beyond them, a rise of land to the upland plain.

"There are three of us in the family," Mary was telling him. "My son Hugh, my daughter Isabel, and I. Isabel is teaching school in my place; she will be home late in the afternoon." She paused and, feeling uneasiness, he turned to face her. "What is your first name, Mr. Redfern?"

"Lanier."

"Well, Lanier, you won't need to wear the gun, will you?"

He had dropped his luggage against the north wall and now he stood at easy attention. "Wearing a gun is sort of a habit, I reckon."

"If you don't mind breaking a habit—" She left the suggestion with him.

Redfern nodded, smiled. "Glad I'm not so set in my ways that I can't break a habit." He unbuckled the gunbelt and dropped it onto his luggage.

"Now," said Mary, "you know better than I do what a man's work is. I shall have to leave it to you. And, of course, I shall expect to pay you."

"It will be a case of reciprocal obligations," he told her, "one cancelling the other."

"We shall discuss the point later, when there's more time for it."

Redfern followed her downstairs. Bilbro met them in the living room. "Hugh is doing fine," he announced optimistically. "He needs quiet—no

company. So—" The doctor glanced warningly at Redfern. "So Redfern had better not go in to see the boy for some little time. In fact, Hugh shouldn't even be told there's a hired man on the place."

Redfern and the doctor went outside.

Bilbro lowered his voice. "Now, look here, Redfern; you've got to be careful. Hugh will recognize you the minute you stick your nose into his room. That means; keep out. Watch your step in other ways, as well. These Snowdens are fine people, but they're proud. You know how to take hold of the work here, I reckon?"

"I reckon I do, Doc. What is more, there's no better time than now to begin."

Redfern hopped off the porch and went for his horse. He led the sorrel to the watering tank, released the windmill from its idle position. In the rising southeast wind, the wheel began to whirl and the pump to rise and fall.

Cattle grazed in a field that communicated with barnlot and tank, and with the clanking of the pump cows and yearlings lifted their heads. Some turned and made their way toward the lot, others soon following. Horses grazed on dry grass in a smaller field, shut off from the rest. Redfern, uncertain when he might need to ride the sorrel, haltered him in a stall and fed him loose hay from the mow.

He observed that the barn was well filled with feed. But even so, the

supply was far insufficient to feed all of the livestock on the place. This meant that haystacks he had seen on adjacent open land belonged to the Snowdens and would have to be hauled in before winter was over.

Thinking of winter feed caused his lips to tighten. He recalled Travis Hardin's warning that six thousand head of Hardin cattle would be turned into Refuge Valley within a week. When that happened, outlying haystacks would disappear almost overnight. That would happen not only to Snowden hay, but to every other unfenced haystack in the valley. Before spring, there would be a hay famine; cattle of the homesteaders would die by hundreds.

"Well, Redfern, he said to himself, *"you've got yourself a job."*

4

TWO HOURS later, Redfern looked up from the posthole he was digging and discovered a man of about his own age staring at him critically from the saddle of a fine bay horse.

"Howdy, stranger," the visitor said inhospitably. "I'm Asa Powers."

"And I," said Redfern, "am Mrs. Snowden's hired man, Lanier Redfern."

"So I heard. Thought I'd better drop by and see what you look like."

Redfern sized him up coolly, figured him to be six-feet-two and about one hundred and eighty pounds of awkward beef and bone. "Hope you're not too disappointed, Powers."

Powers shifted sideways. "Can't say I'm too pleased. And that brings us to the point. I'm Isabel Snowden's beau—if you know what I mean. I've always heard it said that a word to the wise is sufficient."

Powers swung the bay around and loped away. He dismounted at the Snowden yard fence, hitched and strode up to the front porch. Other visitors had arrived earlier, stayed a while and departed. Powers went in. He came out soon afterwards. Redfern worked on with an air of unconcern as Powers cantered by.

Mary Snowden came out a few minutes before noon. By then Redfern had a section of the barnlot fenced off. "I'm just curious, Lanier. Not that I'm interfering."

He had stretched the last strand of wire, leaving only an entrance way. He drove a staple and straightened. "I reckon I should have consulted the boss," he said, grinning. "But you did give me a go ahead."

"Of course I did."

"Well, ma'am, your haystacks have got to be hauled in."

"Why?"

"Because Travis Hardin is bringing six thousand head of cattle to winter in this valley. They'll be here within a week. There's plenty of uncut, dry grass; but those beasts will head for haystacks first off. It's a cow's nature, you know. What they can't eat, they destroy. We could fence your stacks where they are, but who's to say fences wouldn't be cut, or stampeded down when snow hits Refuge Valley? Way I figure it, there's going to be a fight for hay, and we'd better get ready for it."

Wind from the southeast had risen to its steady noonday blow. Clanking of pump and whir of wheel and gears of the windmill punctuated the ceaseless whisper and moan of the wind. Dwellings of homesteaders were far apart; their small residences, few in number; haystacks that stood in clusters on the unfenced valley floor; grazing cattle in the fenced lands; fields of young, green wheat, mostly unfenced. the homesteaders themselves—those were the things that redeemed existence from unbearable loneliness.

There had been a time in Mary's life when not even those things were present, when they were only the grass; the lash of wind upon the earth; the

small Snowden family; farm animals; a few wild creatures; beating, furious elements of rain and snow, and the close darkness of night.

"I don't understand it, Lanier," Mary said gently. "Life was beginning to be bearable for people here." She stood erect, proud, but sad; locks of her dark hair, caught in the wind, quivered across her face. Redfern had never seen a person so beautiful, yet so forlorn.

"Way I see it," Redfern drawled cheerfully, "we're up against one of those final showdowns between cattlemen and settlers. We homesteaders will win, I'm confident of that. But we'll take punishment, too. You made me take off my gun, and that was right. We won't be able to fight Hardin with guns. It will have to be done by law, or in some peaceable manner. If Hardin forces us, we'll have to defend ourselves as best we can. Getting in the hay, I figure, is part of that defense."

Mary gave him a grateful look, softened by a vague smile. "You inspire confidence, Lanier. I don't understand how you happened to come along just when we so much needed you, but perhaps that isn't important. Certainly it is good that we have you." She started away, but called back. "You should come to lunch now."

A couple of neighbor women had brought food and prepared lunch for themselves and the Snowden household.

Redfern, eating with the others, observed that one of the women was sniffing and looking about inquisitively. "I smell healing ointment," she said, looking queerly at Redfern.

He glanced quickly at the middle finger of his left hand. He had forgotten the decoy bandage Dr. Bilbro had put there. It had slipped off and been removed with his glove. He lifted his left hand and sniffed at it. "Had a scratch there," he said quickly. "About all right though."

He finished his meal and went back to work.

ALL AFTERNOON he hauled hay, working alone. It was slow going. To make it worse, the gash across his chest ached. Late in the afternoon he discovered that the dressing was bloody. To keep his shirt from showing a stain, he stuffed hay between shirt and dressing.

Shortly before sundown, while he was pitching hay from the wagon barge, a girl in a buggy pulled up at the barnlot gate. Redfern swung down from the wagon and trotted to the gate to open it. The girl had got out of the buggy for the same purpose.

They met on opposite sides of the latch, looking at each other between the slats of the gate. "Howdy, Isabel," Redfern said, hat in hand, a teasing grin on his soiled face.

"I don't believe—"

"Of course not. I'm Lanier Redfern, the hired man."

"Well, I must say, for a hired man you make yourself real friendly."

"That can be explained, I think," said he, opening the gate.

Isabel started to get back into the buggy to drive through. "I'm sure an explanation would be interesting."

"You run along to the house; I'll take care of your horse and buggy."

She turned and stared at him. Here, thought Redfern, was a true descendant of Mary Snowden. She was close to being a tall girl; slim, but not skimpy. She had her mother's dark hair and dark blue eyes. She had not experienced the bitterness of frontier life, as her mother had experienced it; hence, she had a haughty cheerfulness that hardship had long ago taken out of her mother.

She gave him a pert nod. "Thank you, Lanier." Turning away, she lifted books and lunch basket from the buggy seat and hurried to the house.

The buggy nag was a gentle mare, eager for water and feed. Redfern unhitched her and watered her at the tank, which was now overflowing.

While the mare drank, he levered the windmill out of gear, noting meanwhile that the wind had slacked a bit, though it was still blowing hard enough.

He worked on until dark, pitching hay onto the rising rick in the lot, then placing and tramping what he had hauled. It was slow work. Unaided, he would be at it for a month.

He was alone with the Snowdens at supper. Before coming down from his room he had remembered to retrieve the finger dressing from his glove and put it on the middle finger of his left hand. He made sure it still smelled strongly of ointment. Also, he had covered the bloody dressing on his chest with a folded towel, rummaged from his warbags.

After supper he remained at the table. Opposite him was Isabel. "How's teaching?" he asked. Then he added, grinning, "If a hired man may be so friendly as to inquire."

"Mother has told me about you, Mr. Redfern."

"Is that any reason why you should call me mister?"

"Well, no, I suppose not. And as for teaching, I confess to my incompetence. There are two students in algebra, and I never was any good at algebra."

"You should ask me," said Redfern. "I was a whiz in mathematics."

"Really?" Her brows arched hopefully. "Then you can explain to me why, when you add minus two and plus two, you get nothing."

"That I can." He explained, "Minus two means two less than nothing. Adding the plus two brings it up to exactly nothing. In the same way, minus three means three less than nothing. If you add plus two to that, you are still one short of nothing. That is, you are still minus one."

He found her an apt pupil, and a nice kind of person to help.

But neighbors began to arrive to sit up during the night.

Redfern excused himself. "If I'm needed for anything, let me know."

Isabel gathered up her books and papers. "It was good of you to help me."

"Don't ever think it wasn't a pleasure." He went from the dining room into the hall. He turned at the foot of the stairs. Isabel was looking. "Goodnight, Isabel."

"Goodnight, Lanier."

He went slowly up the stairs, marveling at how quickly they had become friends.

That sense of obligation which had brought him here had transformed itself stealthily into one of anxiety. In time, people would know who had shot Hugh Snowden. That prospect had not greatly disturbed him—until now. Sometime Isabel would know. And when she learned the truth, the proud, sweet loveliness of her would fade from his presence.

He slept but little. Nor was he sure whether wakefulness was due to the throbbing pain in his flesh, or to the turmoil of his thoughts.

NEXT MORNING he was at work, when Dr. Bilbro appeared in the barnlot.

"Redfern, I want to see you."

He dropped from the hay barge. "Any trouble, Doc?"

"I want to give you a fresh dressing."

They retired to the windward side of the barn. Redfern unbuttoned his

clothes. "Didn't sleep much last night, Doc."

Bilbro got at the dressing. "Bad conscience, I'd say. But that's not the worst of it. You bled on the bed sheet. Mary was curious about that."

"What did you tell her?"

"A lie, of course. Told her you probably had nosebleed and were not aware of it."

"Why didn't you tell her the truth, Doc?"

"I will, if her boy recovers. If he dies, you'll be about as welcome here as a hydrophobia polecat would be."

"Yeah. That's what worries me."

"You don't say? Well, I'm not surprised. It was a foregone conclusion that you and Isabel would fall in love with each other. There are some young bachelors hereabouts who've been proposing to her for years, but she's put them off, waiting for somebody more to her fancy, I reckon. Can't say that I'm too happy about it, but you've got fetching ways, besides being a handsome scoundrel."

"Go easy there, Doc. I'm as sore as a pimple. As to Isabel, I've already been advised by one of her suitors that she's preemptied property."

"Uh-huh. Asa Powers. You'll have to whip him, too, Redfern. But take my advice and don't try it before this bullet sore gets healed."

"How's it doing?"

"All right. This work you're doing is not good for it, but that can't be helped, I reckon. It's probably a lucky thing for Mary that you thought of it."

While the doctor applied fresh ointment and dressing, a shadow fell upon them from a corner of the barn. A horseback rider had come through the lot, his horse making little sound on the soft earth.

"Well, looks like something mighty private is going on around here."

They recognized Asa Powers, a knowing sneer on his thick, wide lips.

"Private is right," said Bilbro. "It's a shame some folks don't know how to respect other people's privacy."

"Ain't it the truth!" exclaimed Powers. "But what's got me curious is why it's so private."

"It's my guess you'll have to stay curious," said Bilbro.

"And it's mine," said Redfern, "that's if you want to stay healthy, you'll keep your big mouth shut with respect to what your spying eyes have seen."

"Oh, is that so?" Asa Powers threw a leg over his saddle and slid down. "I reckon we can settle that right now."

Bilbro's half-hearted attempt at intervention was shoved aside by the big, dark farmer.

"Just take it easy, Doc," said Redfern, hastily buttoning his shirt. "I reckon now is as good time as any for what you said would have to be done, sometime or other."

Bilbro backed against the barn and watched.

It was what he regarded as a tough fight. First one was down, then the other. But brawn combined with intellect began to emerge, predominant. Redfern feinted, side-stepped, dodged, made his licks count. He closed Asa's left eye, then bruised his right. He jolted the sodbuster with a hard left, then crossed with a horse-kick right to the chin. Asa went down hard, but he got up groggily. Next time he sat down harder. The third time, he remained sitting.

"Yeah," he said weakly. "Mighty private. But you ain't fooling me none. You're the drifter that shot Hugh Snowden. Maybe the Snowdens don't know about that—yet."

Redfern sleeved his face. "What I said still goes, Asa. If you want to stay healthy, you'll keep your big mouth shut."

"Yeah?" said Powers. "We'll see about that, too."

He got up painfully and went to his horse. After a couple of failures, he managed to pull himself aboard. His backward glance was hostile, foreboding of further trouble.

"Well," said Bilbro, when Powers

had gone, "it looks like the fat's in the fire for certain." He chuckled. "But you sure thrashed him, Redfern. Best fist fight I've seen in years."

Redfern took out a handkerchief and wiped his face and neck. He found his hat and pulled it on tight. "Sorry it had to happen, Doc. But maybe Powers will figure I can lick him again, if he spouts off his big mouth."

"Maybe," said Bilbro, "but I doubt it. Asa's rough and stubborn, but jealous as all get-out. Well, *I* better take a look at that dressing. You gave it some rough treatment there for a while."

Redfern unbuttoned his clothes again. "You're right, Doc. I sure felt misery there for a while."

"My stars, Redfern!" the doctor exclaimed. He shook his head and put on fresh ointment and a fresh dressing. "I may have to put you to bed yet."

"How's Hugh?"

"Hugh's doing all right. I guess you know, however, that the crisis is still to come."

They walked round the barn and Redfern returned to his work.

He had a hard day of it.

WHILE HE worked, he observed other wagons in the valley. Apparently his example had caught on; people were hauling in their hay.

After supper, and before the neighbors had arrived to sit up with the wounded boy, Redfern waited for Isabel to invite help on her algebra.

She cleared the table, but a change had taken place in her demeanor. "Lanier," she said, looking forlornly at her books, "I don't think I can let you help me with my lessons."

He was not greatly surprised. She had seemed distant since her arrival from school. "Now, that's a story for you," he said forcefully. "Tell me why?"

He expected her to accuse him of having shot her brother. Instead, she let him down much easier. "You and Asa Powers had a fight today, didn't you?"

"We did."

"That was inconsiderate of both of you. I don't want men fighting over me."

"No?" he said, grinning. Then he became serious. "It wasn't exactly over you."

She looked surprised, a trifle disappointed. "It wasn't? Then what was it about?"

"Well," he hedged, "maybe it was over you, after all. Asa advised me that he is your beau. Maybe I didn't agree. You know how one word can lead to another."

"Anyhow," Isabel said, "word of the fight has spread among the school children. That could be embarrassing."

Redfern leaned on the table and fixed his eyes on hers. "Now, I ask you; is that any reason why I can't help you with algebra?"

"Really, it isn't. But you could at least say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry I didn't break his neck, if that's what you mean."

She sighed. "Oh, dear. We'll dismiss it. But there's something else I want to know. Why is it that Travis Hardin can build a fence around Refuge Valley? Isn't there any law against that?"

He considered how to explain, being himself unsure of the answer. "Hardin, according to reports, has bought three townships from the railroad company. The talk in Radnor is that he's merely fencing his own land. Maybe it's legal; maybe not; that remains to be seen." He held out a hand, deliberately using the left with its bandaged finger. "Let me have your ruler and a sheet of paper and I'll show you how he's probably working it."

He drew her a map.

Redfern's drawing represented one township, with sections of others that adjoined it. He used solid lines for section boundaries, broken lines to represent the fence.

"As you know," he said, "the Government granted to the railroad company, on each side of the railroad line,

a strip of land ten miles wide. It was not a grant of all of the land within the strip, but of the odd-numbered sections only.

"So, when Hardin bought the railroad company land in Refuge Valley, he got only the odd-numbered sections. The even-number sections were retained by the Government, and it is subject to settlement by homesteaders."

He went round the table and sat by Isabel. "Now, here is how Hardin probably is working his scheme. It's not exactly new; some land-grabbers in Montana have worked the same scheme. You will note from the dotted lines that the fence is located on the odd-numbered sections only. That is, on Hardin land. When it comes to an even-numbered section, it merely drops over a few inches to the right or left as the occasion requires, and picks up on the next odd-numbered section. By this device, and without any actual trespass, Hardin is fencing in over thirty-four thousand acres of homesteaded and Government lands, as well as his own sections, making in all around seventy thousand acres."

ISABEL pondered the scheme, instinctively saw its ruthlessness. "It's outrageous, even if there is no trespass. Yet, I suppose there's no way to stop him."

Redfern did not undertake an answer. "Our immediate problem is not to stop Hardin, but to protect ourselves against six thousand hungry, restless cows."

Neighbors had begun to arrive, Bill Powers among them.

Bill, bearded and rough, barged into the dining room. "Well, well," he said gruffly. "The hired hand courts the school-ma'am." He gave Redfern's back a friendly slap. "Can't say I blame you, Redfern. There's more'n one young buck in this valley who'd like to do the same."

Redfern got up, grinning. "Looks like I've got the inside track on all

of them, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir, it does," said Bill. "And from what I hear from my boy Asa, you're pretty good with your fists. But no hard feelings, Redfern. Fact is, we homesteaders think you're a pretty good sort. Got sense, you have. We're following your example about hauling in our hay. Tomorrow we're all coming over to help you. We've been noticing how you've gone it alone these two days. Spunk, I call it. And spunk is what we're going to need before this is over. I reckon you know how to use a gun, Redfern?"

A cloud had come suddenly over the rough face of Bill Powers. Whether by design, or subconsciously, his eyes lowered to Redfern's chest.

Redfern's own face tightened. He said coldly, "I reckon I'm pretty good with a gun, Mr. Powers."

"Well, now, that's fine. When time comes for a showdown with Hardin, we'll expect you on our side."

"That's where I expect to be," said Redfern.

"Splendid!" Powers looked at Isabel; his face gentled. "Mighty good reports are coming from school, Miss Snowden. Children are all in love with you already. We're mighty pleased."

He gave Isabel a wink. "Well, I won't stay and bother you two."

He left them and returned to the living room.

One thing Redfern regarded as a certainty. Bill Powers knew about the dressing concealed by Redfern's shirt. And Powers was suspicious. Taking no chances either. There had been a sixgun in a shoulder holster under his coat.

"I reckon it's about time for me to turn in," Redfern said, maintaining a carefree manner.

"You must be awfully tired," said Isabel regretfully. She followed him to the stairs. "Goodnight, Lanier."

He paused, poignantly aware of her beauty, lonely in contemplation of her sweet loveliness.

"Goodnight, Isabel."

Redfern locked the door of his room and slept with his sixgun under the bedclothes at his side.

At an unknown hour in the night he awoke to a sound at his door, a faint scraping at its bottom, then, after a brief silence, footsteps retreating softly.

5

WHEN HE got up next morning and lighted a lamp, he found a paper that had been slid under his door. He unfolded it and read: *We're onto you, Redfern. Clear out while you got a chance.* It was in a crude hand, and unsigned.

He dressed, buckled on a shoulder holster and sixgun and put on a jacket for concealment. By lantern light he did chores as usual. The Snowdens kept two milk cows, animals that cowboys traditionally regarded with disfavor. Redfern put aside his ingrained aversion, milked them and carried the pail of milk to the house.

Isabel and Mary had breakfast waiting. Isabel was dressed for school. Both women were reticent as they ate. "Is Hugh worse?" Redfern asked.

"Hugh rested fairly well," Mary answered. Isabel merely glanced at him. She ate sparingly.

Anger stirred in Redfern. "I suppose Asa Powers was here last evening?"

Isabel glanced up, lips parted. "What has that got to do with anything?"

"Let's not have any unkind words," said Mary. "Excuse us, Lanier, if we seem tired."

He finished hurriedly and went out. His first after-breakfast job was to hitch up for Isabel.

She did not chat with him, or smile, as she had done the day before.

Nine ricks of hay still dotted the unfenced portion of the Snowden quarter section. So far he had managed to get in only one unaided. He had just come in with his second load of the day when Dr. Bilbro drove in from town.

The doctor went into the house and stayed several minutes. Redfern was pulling out to go for another load, when Bilbro emerged and hailed him.

Redfern halted his team. "Morning, Doc. How's the patient?"

Bilbro walked up to the wagon. "Come down, Redfern. We'll put on a new dressing for you, and no more being secretive about it."

Redfern climbed down. "So the secret's out, is it?"

"Yeah, thanks to Asa Powers. Asa's a pretty good fellow, most ways, but like I said he's jealous. Also, he's dumb enough to think he can queer you with Isabel."

Redfern opened his clothes. "Maybe Asa's not so dumb at that, Doc. Isabel sure wasn't very friendly this morning. Nor was her mother either."

Bilbro grunted. "They'll get over it—I hope." He went to work.

"That fight I had yesterday didn't help my gun wound any, did it, Doc?"

"Can't say it did." Bilbro looked gloomy as he dabbed on an antiseptic.

"That fight sure helped your reputation though. These are mighty good people here in Refuge Valley but, being frontier folks, they respect a scrapper. The way to win the friendship of an honest ox like Asa Powers is to give him a sound thrashing, which you've already done, as I can well testify to. What Asa told wasn't the whole story anyho.w There was blood on your bed as you remember, and once you forgot to have the bandage on your finger. Somebody saw your horse in the barn, too, and called attention to it. Several men recognized it as the one ridden by the stranger who shot Hugh. Mary, still unconvinced, but suspicious, demanded the truth, and I told her."

"So that now I'm as welcome around here as a hydrophobia polecat would be," said Redfern gloomily.

Bilbro applied fresh ointment and taped a dressing in place. "I wouldn't know about that."

"But you predicted such a result, Doc. Remember?"

"I remember." He completed the job and backed off. "Now, Redfern, tell me why you've got that gun under your jacket?"

"So you noticed that, eh?"

"I did, and I don't like it."

"Can't say I like it myself, Doc; it's heavy and in my way. But I got a threat last night. Some prowler slipped a letter under my door. Advised me to clear out while I have a chance. I figure it was Asa Powers, and I don't have as much confidence in him as you have."

"And you're not clearing out, eh?"

"No, Doc. Certainly not until Mrs. Snowden tells me to clear."

"She won't tell you to clear out," said Bilbro, closing his satchel. "She hired you, and she's one to stick to a bargain, good or bad. It will be up to you, whether you go or stay. Either way you decide, it's going to be awkward." He tramped off toward his buggy. "I'll see you tomorrow, Redfern, if you're still around."

Redfern was in his wagon again. He took up the lines and slapped the horses with them. "I'll be around, Doc."

Neighbors came soon afterwards, bringing ten wagons and plenty of manual help. By sundown the hay was in long ricks inside the lot. Redfern, aided by a twelve year old boy, had done his share, though feeling physically wretched. Some of the men had been friendly, others distant and silent.

AT SUPPER, Mary and Isabel were civil.

After supper, he remained at the table as usual, hoping Isabel would allow him to help with algebra. Mrs. Snowden left them, resumed her vigil with Hugh.

"May I help with the dishes?" Redfern asked.

"If you wish," Isabel replied.

"I'd like it."

"Then you may clear the table." She carried a load into the kitchen, poured hot water into a dishpan and began soaping it.

Redfern followed, carrying plates, glasses, cups, saucers. "You hate me, don't you, Isabel?"

"No, Lanier."

He made several trips to the dining room. When the table was cleared, he began to dry the dishes. "I regret what has happened. You know that, don't you?"

"I should think so."

"You know the circumstances under which I shot your brother?"

"Dr. Bilbro has explained that. So have others. That is why I do not hate you."

Redfern put down a plate and stood for a moment watching her busy hands, looking at her handsome, intelligent face. "Isabel," he said, thoroughly serious, "do you realize that you are very beautiful?"

Her hands stopped. She kept her face averted. "Lanier, I can't let you say things like that to me. If you don't mind, will you please let me finish—alone?"

He put down the dish cloth. "I

should have known better. You thought I was trying to flirt with you, when nothing was farther from the truth. It would be so easy for me to fall in love with you, Isabel. Goodnight."

She gave him no answer.

•

That night his body was tortured by throbbing pain. Fever had set in, and his head ached. This, he thought dazedly, would be the night, also, when Hugh Snowden would begin his fight for life.

About midnight he heard a soft knock.

"Yes?"

"Lanier, will you go for the doctor? Hugh is worse."

The voice was that of Mary Snowden.

He sat up and called to her. "Of course I'll go."

"Thank you. And please hurry."

Her footsteps receded rapidly.

He dressed hurriedly—and painfully. A few minutes later he mounted his sorrel. A sickness was on him, and he had to cling to his saddle. The wind had veered round to the north, bringing icy cold. It moaned in the leafless trees as he rode through the grove which surrounded the Snowden buildings. Refuge Valley was a flat, desolate vagueness under the bright stars.

He reached the Hardin fence, expecting to find the road barred. But the gap was open, and no guard disputed his passage. In Radnor he roused Dr. Bilbro from sleep.

Bilbro came to the door in his night clothes and peered out. "Who is it?"

"Redfern," Lanier answered dully. "Hugh Snowden has had a turn for the worse Mary says, will you please come?"

"As soon as I can dress and hitch up."

IT WAS two o'clock when they reached the Snowden house. Bilbro left his horse and buggy to be looked after by Redfern and hurried in. When Redfern had put up the horses and got to the house, a glance into the living room caught the drawn, silent faces of women. He stumbled up the stairs, undressed and got in bed. At any moment he expected to hear the doleful sounds of weeping, followed possibly by a knock on his door and a request that he leave.

But the night passed. Hugh Snowden had lived through it.

Redfern got up and wretchedly began another day.

North wind chilled his hot face. Thin ice glazed the water in the stock tank. He lifted the gear lever of the windmill, looked up to watch the wheel swing into position at right angles to the long fin of the tail. Wind, sweeping over the treetops, struck the slanted blades and the wheel turned. He caught a discordant sound, suspected that bolts had worked loose in the moving mechanism, considered climbing up to investigate, decided to wait until after breakfast, when the light would be better. Water brought up by the clanking pump poured into the tank, melted its covering of ice.

Breakfast had been prepared by a couple of neighbor women. He had not learned their names. They ate with him.

One of them, a small, round, sympathetic person, eyed him with concern. "Lanier, you look feverish. Do you feel all right?"

"I'm getting by," he answered over his coffee.

The other woman, a gaunt, capable individual with gentle, understanding eyes, shook her head uneasily. "Dr. Bilbro is still here. I'll tell him to have

a look at you. Just now he is dozing by the fire, but he says we're to wake him if he's needed."

"How is Hugh?" Redfern asked.

"Holding his own, the doctor says."

He wondered about Isabel. "Is Isabel going to school?"

"This is Saturday," said the small woman. "We don't have school on Saturdays."

"I asked in order to know whether to hitch up for her."

"Lanier," the gaunt one said, speaking from the anxiety of a good woman, "there are many things we homesteaders like about you. Nobody condemns you for shooting Hugh, since he was out to kill you. But there's talk that you're the man who murdered Harve Chapman, the evening before Hugh was shot."

"Who is talking that?" he asked indignantly.

"Well, when a man is murdered, people are going to wonder who did it. At first our menfolks said Travis Hardin had it done, just to start trouble. Who put suspicion on you, I don't know. As for me, I don't believe you did it."

"Nor do I," said the other woman.

"I'm grateful for your good opinions," said Redfern. "They are entirely justified, too. I'd never seen Refuge Valley before the day I had my run-in with Hugh. Until that day I was riding herd for Noel Thatcher on a drive from Montana. That can be proved, if necessary."

"I'm glad to hear that," the smaller woman said.

"Same here," said the other.

HE SOON finished his meal, having no appetite anyway. Before they remembered about his need of medical attention, he was gone.

Tops of trees swayed now before the driving wind. Blades of the windmill made a blur, like a shining disk. Mingled with the usual clank and jar of the pump, a sharp, jerking noise was to be heard. Redfern, looking up, could see its source, a loose clamp where the pump rod connected with the cogwheels.

After a search in the barn he found a couple of wrenches. Built inside the steel frame, a ladder led up to the top of the windmill tower. He pulled down the lever that brought wheel and tail fin round side by side, so that the wheel no longer turned. Slowly he climbed, pausing now and then when his brain rocked.

Fighting against dizziness, he reached the top and tightened the bolts. While there, clinging to the swaying steel, he took a look around the valley, the far-spaced houses, trees that served as wind-breaks, fields of winter wheat, showing green. A few haystacks remained out on the flats, flimsy fences around them.

Redfern saw them then—the Hardin cattle. Far northward, where the great plain broke downward into Refuge Valley, the red-and white herd poured like a strange waterfall through a wide fence gap into the lowland. Where a field had lain green, and red-and white covering spread steadily, thousands of hoofs trampled young wheat into the soft earth. Outlying haystacks were surrounded, filmsy fences at once broken. Redfern wondered if the Snowden ricks, not enclosed in the lot, would be safe.

He had not seen the riders approach, but now he heard his name called. Looking down, he saw five men, all of about his own age, Asa Powers among them.

One of them shouted, "We want to talk to you, Redfern."

They were unfriendly. They had guns.

Redfern was too sick to be angry. He felt disgust, rather. "You'd better be talking to Travis Hardin. His cattle are coming in from the north, thousands of them. They're tramping young wheat into the ground; they're breaking fences around haystacks."

The riders looked at one another. He heard one of them say, "Those hay-

stacks are ours. Hardin will pay for this."

Four of them rode off.

Asa Powers stayed behind. "We'll be back, Redfern. We've figured out who murdered Harve Chapman. There's some things we want to ask you."

"Why don't you stay and ask them?" Redfern demanded, with rising anger. "Or must you have a bunch of bullies to side you?"

"I can take care of myself all right," said Powers. He swung round to follow his cronies. He called back, "You had your warning, Redfern. You've still got a chance to clear out."

From his cold perch in the swaying tower, Redfern gazed northward again, watched the invading herd spread slowly southward, riders moving leisurely behind. He counted as many as he could distinguish from cattle, made out at least forty men. Many of these, he imagined, were gunmen who had worked for Ranse Hardin, Travis Hardin's ruthless father, gunman himself, and promiscuous cattle-brander who had always reached the end of a cross-country drive with more cattle than he had started with.

"Redfern!"

He looked down. Dr. Bilbro motioned to him.

Before descending, he took a final look northward. A dozen homesteaders had gathered before one of the houses. Because of distance, he recognized none of them, but he did catch a glance of sunlight on steel and concluded that they were armed.

At the foot of the tower he stopped, his head reeling. "What is it, Doc?"

"Better come in. I hear you've got a fever."

He followed the doctor. They went into the kitchen, where a work table had been cleared. Isabel was there, clean clothes at hand, water boiling on the cook stove. He undressed from the waist up, laying jacket, sixgun, shirt and undershirt in a neat stack on a chair. Without being told to do so, he stretched himself on the table. The kitchen was warm.

Bilbro soaked his dressing loose and removed it. His eyes narrowed. Isabel was looking on, her face impassive. The girl had nerve, that was certain.

"What's the verdict, Doc?"

"Inflamation."

"Blood poisoning?"

"Possibly." He nodded to Isabel. "A pan of hot water."

She poured the water, added cold water, tested the result with a finger. She handed the doctor a towel. He wet it, wrung it out and laid it on Redfern's chest.

In a glass bowl he prepared a solution. "This," he explained, "is a ten-percent solution of carbolic acid." He dipped a folded cloth into it, lifted it out, dripping, and placed it over Redfern's wound. Isabel took away the displaced towel. Bilbro covered the wet cloth with a second towel and Redfern's chest with a blanket.

"Now, Isabel."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"You've got a job. Keep the solution warm by setting the bowl in hot water on the stove. Every fifteen minutes, pour a little of it on the cloth over the sore. Keep it thoroughly wet. And, Redfern, you're to stay out for at least two hours." He took his satchel and went into the living room.

Isabel found work to do, peeling potatoes; looking at the pot of white beans, adding water from the teakettle; working down the bread rising; replenishing the fire in the stove; looking in occasionally at a roast. She washed her hands and dried them, poured solution on the cloth as the doctor had directed, replaced towel and blanket.

"You must find this very disagreeable," Redfern said weakly.

"Not so very," she replied.

She went on with her work.

"How is Hugh?" Redfern asked.

"Dr. Bilbro says he will make it."

"I'm sure glad to hear that."

When she had again saturated the cloth she stood over him for a moment and looked at his face, just looked, without betraying a thought.

"If you're thinking what I'm think-

ing," he told her, "you're wishing you did not have to be my enemy."

She said unhappily, "I'm not your enemy."

BEFORE THE two hours had passed, a group of riders thundered into the open space between yard and barnlot. "Hello in there!" a harsh voice shouted.

Redfern sat up. He could see them through a window, about twenty gun-toters. Travis Hardin was out front.

Dr. Bilbro opened a side door and went out.

"If it ain't the sawbones again," said Hardin.

"What do you want, Hardin?"

"Now, Doc, don't get your dander up. I just wanted the folks who livee here to know I've brought my cattle in. Another thing. I've closed in with my fence, and there's to be no wire-cutting, unless somebody wants to get killed. But I'm a just man, Doc; I've put in a toll gate between here and Radnor. So, any time you or anybody else wants to go to town, all you got to do is pay toll—fifty cents each way. Now, if there's anybody around who objects to paying toll, he doesn't have to go to town, does he, Doc?"

"You've spoken your piece," said Bilbro. He turned indignantly and strode back into the house. The horsemen pounded away.

Redfern and Isabel were gloomily silent, then their eyes met. In hers there was fear. Without saying so, possibly without being aware of what she did, as women always did in time of peril, she looked to a man for guidance. Isabel put her faith in him. He read it in her eyes, in every line and curve of her face.

It had a sobering effect. He looked at the chair, where his clothes and gun lay. He looked at Isabel, and there was a disapproving frown on her forehead.

"No shooting, eh?" he inquired.

"No," she said. "There must be some other way."

6

SICK OR WELL, in high spirits or low, Redfern had work to do. For three more days he dug postholes, tamped posts, strung wires. Not one fence, but four surrounded the Snowden hay lot, the outermost being of eight strands, with posts four feet apart and set deep. For materials, a pasture fence had to be appropriated.

Hardin cattle repeatedly broke into the barnlot, drank the watering tank dry, pressed against wires of the hay either cut by Hardin's men or broken Snowden cattle and kept them in the barn, letting them out only for water. Pasture fences of other farmers were either cut by Hardin's men or broken by his cattle. Hardin's riders made no attempt to restrain the cattle or herd them onto open flats. Lured by fragrance of freshly stacked hay, the restless animals milled around barns and fenced ricks, bawling, forcing their heads between wires, pushing until wires screeched and popped under their hard-driven staples.

During the fourth night of unrestrained wandering, they broke into three hay lots—Rowlett's, Ezell's, Jessup's. They shoved one another against the stacks, horned their way into them, climbed, pawed, destroyed. By morning ricks were low, irregular mounds, covered with cows and steers, eating, pushing, wasting.

Armed horsemen in groups of twenty to thirty rode among the homesteads, making a hostile, arrogant show of themselves, flaunting their power. At night their guns could be heard, with thuds of hard riding, wild yells. Sometimes they drifted by, shadowy, moonlit figures, silent except for noise of hoofs.

Isabel said at supper, "The children

were saying at school that Hardin is offering to buy out any farmer who have proved up and have patents to their lands."

This should have been a time of renewed hope. Redfern's chest was healing; Hugh was on a steady mend; fences put up by Redfern had held. But they were worried, Mary and Isabel especially.

Redfern asked, "Has anybody sold out?"

"There's talk that two or three have sold. Sam Conrick, for one. Also, Alec Treddles."

"They were dissatisfied anyhow," said Mary. "Always complaining."

Redfern and Isabel stayed in the dining room after supper. He was again helping her with algebra.

"There were visitors at school today."

"Yes?"

"Two of Hardin's cowboys."

"On what business?"

"To make trouble, I suppose. They came in and made themselves at home, talked and yelled for about an hour. When I asked them to leave, they just laughed."

"Hmmm," said he. "Looks like I may have to enroll in school myself."

"No!" she said in alarm. "That's probably what they're hoping for. Travis Hardin would like nothing better than for you to come out and show fight. School children are saying Hardin means to kill you."

"Hardin will have to choose a better time and place. But a showdown is coming, all right. Hardin has made that clear enough."

Isabel fell silent. Her face had a bewildered, lost look. Then she said unhappily, "Lanier, why don't you go away—back to Wyoming?"

He slid down in his chair. "Now, wouldn't that be something!" He pretended a yawn. "If I may change the subject, up in my home country we banked our houses with compost at the beginning of winter. Keeps them much warmer; saves fuel."

"We do that here, too."

"Then it looks as if I've got work to do yet." He grinned. "Besides I like it here."

He caught her eye, but she looked away quickly. "You seem so sure of yourself, Lanier. As if we had nothing at all to trouble us. How can you be so light-hearted, when danger is all around us, waiting, watching for a chance to destroy us all?"

He sat up, touched her hand. "Things may be better or worse. As to that, I know not. But of these things I am sure. You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. You are incomparably sweet and kind. Another thing I am sure of; I'm falling in love with you up to my neck."

She drew her hand away—slowly, with evident regret. "We should not speak, or think, of love. With all this trouble that has come upon Refuge Valley, we should think only of deliverance."

"Trouble," he said musingly. "It is another name for good luck." He was silent a moment, studying her. He continued, "Except for trouble, I might never have met you."

Isabel stacked her books. "Goodnight, Lanier."

He got up, disappointed, but resolute. "Goodnight, beautiful."

A FEW EVENINGS later, there were four at the Snowden table —Mary, Isabel, Redfern and Hugh. Until then, Redfern and Hugh had not faced each other since the shootings. It was a tense time as they seated themselves, Hugh by his sister; Mary by Redfern. Of course, Mary and Isabel had told Hugh everything—prepared him for this meeting.

Redfern had some inkling of what the boy's attitude would be. Mary and Isabel, by their own renewed friendliness, had forecast Hugh's behavior. Redfern was prepared for some pretense of hostility, but hopeful of quickly improved relations.

He looked straight into Hugh's eyes, steady, challenging. He grinned, "Howdy, stranger."

Pale, weak, uncertain, Hugh hesitated. He said finally, "I ought to hate you, Lanier, but I don't."

Redfern's grin broadened. "But you do look like a starved yearling."

Hugh came back instantly, "You don't look like a fat horse yourself."

Thus tenseness was broken.

Isabel's happiness manifested itself in tears. She fled from the table. But she came back soon, not a tear in sight.

The following Saturday, Redfern and Isabel put up the storm windows. That evening the living room was filled with visitors. They pretended they had come to celebrate Hugh's recovery. Actually they had come seeking advice and help.

Caleb Wardell, bearded, gruff, worried, looked across the room at Redfern. "You're the only man I know of who doesn't seem worried, Redfern. How do you do it?"

Redfern glanced at Isabel, grinned provokingly, exasperatingly. "I'm having too good a time to be worried."

Caleb grunted understandingly. "That's not a bad answer. But I can tell you this, young man. The rest of us are plenty worried."

"Is this a grievance committee?"

"Well, now, it could be; yes, sir."

"And what are the complaints?"

"Now, first off, Redfern, some of us owe you an apology. There's been talk that it might have been you who murdered Harve Chapman. Nobody thinks that now. You've shown better judgment than anybody else in this valley, and we think you're here for a good purpose."

"I don't think that," said Asa Powers. "I think he's just mooching on the Snowdens for the winter."

Redfern got up. "Would you like to go outside and say that?"

Mary Snowden rose promptly. "Lanier! Asa didn't mean that seriously. Please sit down."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Snowden." He resumed his seat, eyeing Asa suspiciously.

"You all noticed how easy it was to get him to sit down," said Asa, lowering his mouth corners and lifting his eyebrows.

Redfern's map of a portion of Refuge Valley

"No more of this," said Caleb Wardell. He glanced round the room, at worried women, sullen men. "We've got grievances, all right," he said with righteous wrath. "First is that toll gate. It means we're prisoners; we've got to pay tribute to Hardin before we can go to town, and before we can come home. Another thing; a lot of hay has been ruined by Hardin cattle. Unfenced wheat has been tramped into the ground. Half a dozen houses have had their windows shot out. Children are getting afraid to go to school. Something's got to be done. But what?"

"I tell you what." A red-faced farmer half-rose and shook his hard fist. "I'm aimin' to shoot the next Hardin beef that pokes its head through my fence. Keeps me busy mending wires and jabbing noses with a pitchfork."

Another farmer spoke out. "I'm in favor of setting fire to the grass. Burn over this valley, and Hardin will have to take his cattle elsewhere."

"Why not build a counter-fence, cutting him off from the river? He's got no wells. By the time he had enough of them drilled and windmills put up, his stock would all be dead."

Hester Boring, a slanternly woman of forty, jerked her head up. "Why don't you shoot it out with the roughnecks? Take 'em by surprise. That's what I'd do. I wish I was a man."

GIP BORING, Hester's husband, got up and stared all around. "I know what I'm going to do; I'm going to cut them wires. Nobody can fence me in. I got a right to go to town, or anywhere else, any time I please."

"All of this is dangerous talk," said Redfern. "The best thing to do is keep your stock under shelter and your hay fenced. Hardin has got us outnumbered, three to one. If we fight him, directly or indirectly, he will retaliate. If we shoot one of his steers, he will slaughter all of ours. If we burn his grass, he will burn our houses. If we try a counter-fence, shutting him off from water, he will cut the fence, and all of our work and expense will go for nothing. If we try a shootout with his men, we will be massacred."

Asa Powers leaned forward obtrusively. "Then what do you propose, wise boy?"

"I propose we look after our families and our stock and give Hardin no excuse to hit us."

"That sounds like coward talk," sneered Asa.

"I think it is very sensible," said Mary Snowden.

"So do I," said Isabel.

Asa scowled, but kept quiet.

Gip Boring was still on his feet, staring wildly. "Not me! I'm not going to be shoved around. You'll see."

A feeble voice came from the direction of Hugh Snowden's bedroom. Faces swung in that direction. Hugh, in night clothes, stood in the doorway, steadying himself by holding to the doorknob.

"I've got a vote in this," he said. "We'll do whatever Lanier Redfern says do."

"Why, Hugh!" several exclaimed. Expressions of pleasure went round.

"You've all been mighty good to us," said Hugh, "but you better listen to Redfern. I don't know what's in his mind, but he will get us out of this."

Isabel got up and went to her brother. "That was splendid of you," she told him. "Now, back to bed. You're too sick to get into a quarrel."

"There you are," said Gip Boring, when the bedroom door had closed. "It's the advice of weaklings. Well, it's not for me. I'm going to do something about it."

Talk at length drifted to other subjects, dulled and ran out. The neighbors went home, and Redfern went to his room.

THE ROOM was cold. He started to light the kerosene stove, changed his mind and went to bed. Through the north window, he could see a segment of sky, swept clean by the north wind. Tops of cottonwoods and ash swayed, their twigs conveying an illusion of fingers brushing at the bright stars.

No mirth touched his lips now, no grin was needed to cover the heaviness of his worry. He lay awake for hours, studying the problem that Travis Hardin had flung down in Refuge Valley, wondering when a personal showdown would come between him and Hardin, dreading that issue, but certain it could not be avoided.

From the position of the Great Bear in relation to the North Star, he judged the time to be a little after midnight. Moan of the wind had sunk to a whisper. Gunshots in the northeast punctuated the whispers. He counted them. Seven. Then five more. Their spacing indicated they had an immediate objective—death in the night.

He was up and around by daylight. Close-in fences were intact, but Hardin cattle were crowded on the leeward side of the barn and hay ricks, sheltering there from the cold that bit and stung and froze the outdoor world. Shacks had gone up on Hardin sections, southward and eastward, their stovepipe chimneys spewing smoke.

Against the shacks were lean-to stables. Beyond were vague lines of trees that marked the course of the river.

After breakfast, Dr. Bilbro came. Following a short stay indoors, he came out to the barn, where Redfern was cleaning stalls. "Well, Redfern, I reckon I'm through in the valley—until somebody else gets shot. Hugh is practically well. And so are you."

"Thanks to your good work," said Redfern.

"And yours," said Bilbro.

"Now that we've finished our mutual admiration session, what do I owe you in good hard cash, Doc?"

"Drop into my office sometime. We'll have a settlement then, maybe."

"Suits me, Doc. Now, another thing. When will Hugh be able to take over the work here?"

"Certainly not for a month. What's the hurry?"

"I'm afraid there's not any, Doc."

"Well, all right then. Stick around. If I'm any judge, you're as welcome as springtime."

They strolled into the lot.

Hoofbeats sounded hard and fast on the frozen ground. A settler rode in from the east, made a turn through the eastern windbreak of trees and slid his horse to a halt.

"Well, Moody," said Bilbro, "you ride like a man in a hurry."

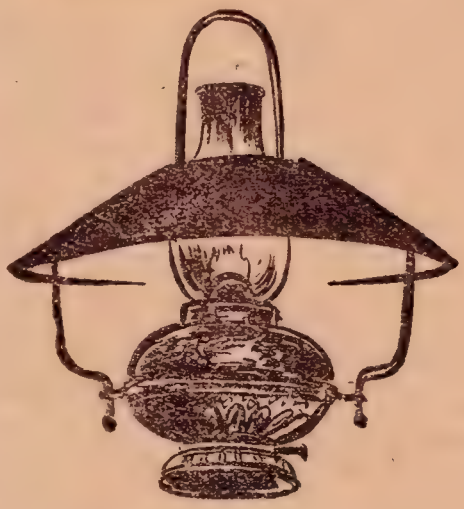
Moody, a short, bearded farmer, stared at them, wrath in his gray-green eyes. "What do you suppose has happened now?"

Bilbro shook his head. "I couldn't imagine."

"They've hung Gip Boring, that's what. Hung him to one of his own cottonwoods. Probably shot him first; body's riddled with bullets." He drew a paper from inside his sheepskin coat. "That was tied across his chest."

Bilbro reached for it and read. Scrawled were the words, *This nester was caught cutting fence. Take note of what happened to him. Same will happen to you if you don't watch out.*

He handed the paper to Redfern.



"Maybe a lawyer will know what to do about that."

Redfern stared at it a moment, then glanced at Moody. "Want it back?"

"Caleb Wardell thought maybe you could use it."

"Yeah," said Redfern. "Yeah, maybe I can."

"Homesteaders are fighting mad," said Moody. "Maybe you'd like to join us, Redfern? Our motto from now on is: *An eye for an eye.*"

"Not a bad motto," Redfern said soberly. "Only trouble is, we homesteaders don't have enough eyes. Hardin's killers are just itching for us to start something. I've made my sentiments plain; the only chance we have of survival is by avoiding a fight."

"Redfern is right," said Bilbro. "Travis Hardin spends most of his time in town, bragging about his plans. He's bought property there, including barns and a shipping yard. Says he aims to have Refuge Valley, every inch of it. Nothing would suit him better than having an excuse to burn you people out. Take Redfern's advice, and be patient. Something will turn up yet."

Moody looked at both of them with bitter disappointment. "Yeah," he said. "Something will turn up. We all know what—some more dead faces."

A cold contempt showed in his countenance. "But there's one thing certain—Redfern will make sure it's not his face among 'em." He swung his horse and rode back the way he had come.

The two left behind watched him in silence until he had made the turn through the trees. Then Bilbro tightened his top coat against the cold. "These homesteaders are getting desperate, Redfern. They don't know what to do. That's why Moody brought that paper to you; people think you, being a lawyer, could do something if you would. All they can think about is fighting back, and killing. They don't have enough imagination to see themselves getting killed."

Redfern studied for seconds. "Doc," he said then, "do you still say it will be a month before Hugh can take over doing chores?"

The doctor frowned. "Redfern, are you serious or not? I never can tell."

Redfern grinned. "I'm serious, Doc. You see, I'm a homesteader, too. Just as soon as I can get round to it, I'm going to build me a sod house and start batching. I'm going to plant forty acres of spring wheat, too, and get me a few cows. Refuge Valley is homesteader country. Travis Hardin and his marauding cattle will pass like a bad dream. Someday these deep-soiled flats will be irrigated lands—garden spot of the West. I'm going to be in on that, Doc, as sure as shootin'. Now, Doc, how much longer must I be a hired man?"

Jeff Bilbro had looked as he listened. "A month, Redfern. And do you know something? For the first time since we met, I like your demeanor and the way you talk. You give me a good, healthy feeling."

What he meant was, that beneath Redfern's bright, apparently carefree exterior he perceived a cold, calculating deadliness. He nodded his satisfaction and headed for his horse and buggy, hitched at the Snowden yard fence.

7

NOVEMBER'S light snow lay evenly upon Colorado's eastern plain. It had fallen in the early morning, before day winds had a chance to whirl it over the land and pile it in drifts against soapweed, sage, and small upthrusts of the ground. Westward the Rocky Mountains were massive white barriers against a murky sky.

When Lanier Redfern's train pulled into Denver, snow was again falling. To farmers and provident ranchers alike, snow was the substance of life. Warmth in the deep earth caressed its underside and drank it into the dry ground. In early spring it became living substance—the green grass of mountain valleys, the prairie grass of the plains and river flats. Only the big cowmen disliked it. They depended on the uncut dead grass for winter feed; they had no barns, no haystacks, no shelters.

Redfern liked the snow. But his thoughts were elsewhere now; in Denver's streets he walked with a purpose—straight to the federal building—straight into the office of the United States attorney for the district of Colorado.

A young woman sat at a desk. Her fingers came to rest on the keys of a typewriter. Before her stood a tall, blue-eyed young man, a heavy coat over his left arm, hat in hand, his thick, sandy hair parted on the left side and growing rather long. "Morning, ma'am," said the stranger.

She was a good looking girl, eyes bright with eager interest. "Oh, how do you do? Is there something I can do for you?"

"I'd like to see the district attorney."

"Mr. Weller is busy just now. Won't you have a chair?"

"Thanks." He sat down.

The young woman drew a note pad to a corner of the desk and held a pencil over it. "I am Miss Heath, Mr. Weller's secretary. Who shall I tell him is calling?"

"Lanier Redfern," he replied. "I am a lawyer from Radnor. My business is a matter, I believe, which vitally concerns the Government."

Miss Heath got up. "Just a moment, Mr. Redfern." She went into a back office. A little later she returned, followed by two men with badges on their coats. Deputy marshals, he observed with interest.

Miss Heath said, "Mr. Weller will see you, Mr. Redfern."

Redfern hung up his coat and hat and followed Miss Heath.

A middle-aged, expressionless man sat behind a desk. He had a large, round head, small eyes, graying hair. He got up with an air of mild boredom.

"Mr. Weller," Miss Heath said, "this is Lanier Redfern."

Weller offered his hand which, surprisingly, had a good grip. "Sit down, Mr. Redfern."

"Thanks," said Redfern. He sat down. "I assume I'm at the right place," he said cheerfully.

"That depends," said Weller, voice and manner listless. "Miss Heath said you had a matter which concerned the Government."

"Miss Heath probably told you that I am a lawyer from Radnor. That's part of the story. I'm also a homesteader in Refuge Valley, near Radnor, on the Union-Pacific Railroad. A cattle man named Travis Hardin has got us fenced in down there."

Redfern expected Weller to show a little interest, enough at least to cause an eyebrow to lift. Weller remained impassive. "Proceed, sir."

"Well," said Redfern, grinning, "we homesteaders don't like it too much."

"Naturally."

"Hardin is a big operator. He's bought the odd-numbered sections of three townships. Has about a hundred men working for him, herding cattle, operating his stockyards in town, but mostly guarding his fence. He's got a toll gate across the road to Radnor. Any time we homesteaders want to go to town, we have to pay toll, both going and coming. We don't go often, so we're not out much money. It's just sort of humiliating, I reckon."

"Naturally," said Weller.

"It's a right destructive situation, too," said Redfern. "Hardin's cattle have overrun homestead lands, tramped winter wheat into the ground, broken fences, destroyed hay ricks. We have a school down there, too, but it looks like we might have to close the school, on account of a reign of terror Hardin's men are waging against us."

"Is that all?" asked Weller.

"Not exactly. Three homesteaders have been hanged. Letters have been fastened to their bodies, accusing the dead of having cut fence. Possibly that was true as to one of them, but I doubt it as to the others."

"Have the homesteaders no organization?"

Redfern shook his head. "The homesteaders are family people. If they resorted to organized self-help, a lot of them would get killed, maybe all of them. One family has been burned out already. The same thing could happen to all of them. We thought maybe the Government could do something about it."

"What would you suggest?" Weller asked with disheartening unconcern.

Redfern was becoming uncomfortable. He had expected to meet a normal human being; instead, he'd run into a bag of ice. It was disappointing, yet amusing. Having reserved what he regarded as the decisive prod, he said, "It was my understanding that Congress had passed a law against unauthorized enclosure of Government land."

Weller's eyebrows went up. "Government land, did you say?"

Redfern became solemn, yet he wanted to laugh. "That's what I said, sir. Most of that land is still unsettled. I reckon two-thirds of the even-numbered sections are still public domain."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" Weller demanded. He leaned forward, rested his arms on his desk. His expression had become animated, indignant. "Describe that fence."

"I can do better than that," said Redfern. He pulled a paper from his coat pocket, unfolded it and tossed it across to Weller. "There's a map. You can see that the fence is actually on Hardin's land, but the effect of it is to fence in everybody's land, farms and Government land alike."

Weller studied the map, his round face flushed with anger. He stared at Redfern. "This device has been tried before. The courts have held it unlawful. Would you like to wait around and sign a complaint against Hardin?"

Travis Hardin's cruel, shrewd image rose before Redfern. Signing a complaint against Hardin would be asking for swift, violent death. Redfern drew a handkerchief across his forehead. "Yeah," he said, "I'll sign it."

"Come back in one hour," said Weller.

REDFERN went out into the town, tramped the snowy walks, absently observed the drifting flakes, paused now and then to shake accumulations of snow from his coat. Denver was not a cowtown. It was a miner's town, a businessman's town. Possibly it was a lawyer's town, too. He did not have to go back to Radnor. He could set up in Denver. There were many places other than Radnor, wheer he could open an office. He was not rich, but he had money. He did not have to homestead land, live like a gopher in a sod house, plow forty acres a year for three years, tramp the snow, fight the cold winds. Denver offered comfort—and safety.

At the end of an hour he was back in Weller's office.

"You know Hardin pretty well?" asked Weller.

"Pretty well," Redfern answered grimly.

"When are you going back to Radnor?"

"On the next train that runs."

"A deputy marshal will be on the same train."

On the train, Redfern and deputy marshal Scott Kirby sat together for a while. Kirby was a thin-faced, unsmiling individual with a shoulder gun under his coat.

"Hardin is a mean cuss," Redfern told him.

"So I've heard."

"He'd as leave kill you as not to," Redfern said.

"They all would," said Kirby.

"Would you like to have me along?"

"Thanks, but I won't need you."

Redfern did not go along when they reached Radnor. By lantern light he got his horse from Dr. Jeff Bilbro's barn and hitched him in front of Flannery's saloon. It was ten o'clock at night. Deputy marshal Kirby was searching the town for Hardin. Redfern had got word that Hardin was at Flannery's. He waited outside in the snow until he saw Kirby coming along the dimly-lighted boardwalk. He eased in behind Kirby and leaned against the wall near the door, hand ready to gun.

Kirby strode forward and glanced about the saloon, his face set in fearless purpose. The place was crowded.

Kirby went to the bar and asked the barkeep something. The latter nodded toward a table where four men played poker for small stakes. Kirby went to the table, paper in hand, his coat loose, sixgun at a convenient slant underneath.

He looked at Hardin and thumbed a lapel badge into view. "Travis Hardin?"

"That's me," said Hardin.

"I am Scott Kirby, United States deputy marshal. You are hereby summoned to appear in Denver in the federal court room on the fourth of December next, and answer a charge of having unlawfully enclosed land belonging to the United States; also, to show cause why the nuisance you have created should not be summarily abated. I hand you this summons, and a copy of the Government's complaint and petition. You will appear, or judgment will be entered against you by fault and appropriate measures taken thereafter."

Kirby dropped the papers on Hardin's table, turned his back and strode out.

Hardin, face pink with anger, stared at the papers.

"Why not take a look, Hardin?" asked one of the card players. "It ain't often a man gets a thing that important. And from the Government, too."

Hardin picked up the papers and slowly examined them.

Redfern could see his eyes lowering. Redfern's own signature was on the complaint. He knew when Hardin's eyes met the signature, saw the flame in them, the avenging wrath.

Redfern eased out unseen by Hardin, mounted his horse and rode to Refuge Valley. Two guards challenged him at the toll gate. He paid without disclosing his identity. A short time after midnight he reached the Snowden house.

THERE WAS a light in the house. Isabel answered his knock.

"Lanier!" She kissed him impulsively. "Oh, Lanier!"

Then she backed away, shocked at what she had done.

He closed the door, took off his gloves and heavy coat, tossed them with his hat onto a chair. "Do that again. Next time, give *me* a chance."

"No, Lanier. I didn't mean it—I didn't realize what I was doing."

Mary Snowden heard their voices. She came from her bedroom, wearing a robe and moccasins. "Lanier! It's good to see you. Tell us everything."

They sat by the stove in the living room. Hugh got out of bed and joined them. Redfern told them about his trip, about the service of the papers on Hardin.

"What will he do now?" said Isabel.

"That's what I'm wondering," Redfern said. "He may go berserk. If he burned us out, we'd have to leave. He'd have the valley then, even without his fence. Let's hope he doesn't start it. If he does, we're lost."

"We can fight back," declared Hugh, almost his old self, fiery, impulsive. "Seems to me we've put up with just about enough anyhow."

Isabel and Mary paled.

"No," Isabel said. "There have been too many shootings."

Redfern looked at a red spot on the stove. "I'm afraid Hugh is right this time. If Hardin decides on burning, he will start with the hay and barns. After that, unless the homesteaders move out, he will burn the houses. It looks as if Hugh and I will have to sleep in the barn for a while. Hardin's men will come at night, if they come at all. It will be like Hardin to send out small groups, intending to do the whole job in one night. That will be a break for the homesteaders—if they're ready."

"We'll take along the shotgun," said Hugh. "It was dad's. There's plenty of ammunition for it—buckshot, which he used against coyotes. At night one could hardly miss, using that."

"I can't agree," said Mary. "If

Hardin decides to burn our barn and hay, let him burn them. Better that than having you both down with pneumonia, or dead from bullets"

"It will be brave enough, just defending the house," Isabel said.

"Way I see it," Redfern explained, "if all of the homesteaders are on watch, and Hardin's men come in small groups, we can give them a hot reception. Seems to me this might be our opportunity to teach Travis Hardin a good lesson. A little surprise might have the effect of holding him off from something much worse than trying to burn barns."

"Sure," said Hugh. "I'm for it."

"Maybe it's the wisest course," said Mary. "Anyhow— Well, I think we shall have to trust to Lanier's judgement."

"Then I'll make the rounds early tomorrow," Redfern said.

He went into the hall, paused at the stairs hoping Isabel would follow to tell him goodnight. She did not come. He remembered the soft, quick pressure of her lips—a caress of joy, not of love. Reluctantly he tramped up to his room. When he was in bed, he lay awake, thinking of Isabel. He remembered the girl in Denver, Miss Heath, Weller's secretary. He remembered the look of eagerness in her face, the readiness to be friends, to love and be loved. But he had come back to Refuge Valley—to Isabel. This, he knew, was where he belonged.

EARLY NEXT morning he mounted his sorrel and began a visit among the homesteaders. He could not visit all of them. As he went, he divided the work. Warning went to all, and through succeeding nights farmers and their sons kept watch.

On the night of December second, Hugh and Redfern, concealed in the Snowden barn, heard hoofbeats approaching over the frozen ground. Three riders pulled up by the barnlot fence. One of them struck a match and touched it to a torch. The torch, evidently a rag soaked in oil, leaped into flame. The rider drew back to fling it onto a hay rick.

"Now!" said Redfern.

Hugh's shotgun blazed from a window of the barn; Redfern's sixguns roared. The man dropped the torch, slumped forward and fell. One of the others screamed, but held on. He and the third gigged their horses. There was another scream as a second charge of buckshot ripped after them.

From other homesteads came the reports of shotguns, Colts and rifles. Northeastward the sky grew bright with the flames of burning hay, then of a burning barn. Hugh and Redfern stayed where they were. The man who had fallen from his horse lay still, the torch burning out at his side. Next morning they found his body, frozen stiff.

At breakfast Hugh was in high spirits. "We sure put a quietus on one of those hombres. I guess they've learned their lesson, all right."

Redfern was somber. "They will be back," he predicted gloomily. "Hardin knows now where he made his mistake; he shouldn't have divided his men. Next time they will move in a body, and none of us will know where they will strike first."

Mary was pale with worry. "What shall we do? If only the Government did not move so slowly!"

During the day, news of the night before went from one dwelling to another. Fourteen arsonists had been killed. Two homesteaders had received minor injuries.

An undertaker came out from town and hauled away the dead bodies.

Dr. Bilbro appeared late in the afternoon. He was welcomed as a deliverer at the Snowden house.

"Well," he said, when he'd stretched his legs toward the hot stove, "Hardin's gang sure got the surprise of their lives. I doctored wounded men half the night and most of the forenoon. Five of them died in spite of anything I could do." He fell silent, then spoke gloomily. "But Travis Hardin is killing mad. Talking plenty, too. As soon

as he gets a little morale instilled into his gunnies again, he says he's coming back. It's rumored he's hiring more men, as far as from Fort Dodge. Next time, he says, it will be a different story. He's also making a play for public sympathy. Accuses the homesteaders of being the aggressors. Says he was attacked by a bunch of lawless men, and without the slightest provocation. Not only that; he claims he was attacked on his own property."

They looked at Redfern, who comprehended the gravity of their situation. "When will he strike again, Doc?"

"Oh, I'd say in a week or ten days. Right now he's having trouble with his hired killers. A few have quit him. Others want more pay. But he will satisfy them and more than replace all who quit, or got killed. Next time he'll come in broad daylight. Depend on it, too, he'll claim self-defense. Our best hope is the Government. Redfern, what can you do? You know, we're looking to you from here out."

"That's expecting a lot from a frail reed like me," Redfern responded.

"Nobody thinks you're a frail reed," said Mary.

"I should say not," declared Hugh.

Redfern was far from over-confident, but he had a fighting urge. "When is the next train to Denver, Doc?"

"At nine o'clock tonight."

"Did you have any trouble at Hardin's toll gate?"

"Nobody there. I drove right through. Maybe he can't get anybody to be gate keeper, after last night."

"I'll ride back with you," said Redfern.

Bilbro shook his head. "It won't do. You're a marked man, Redfern. It's my suggestion you slip in after dark and hitch your horse at the depot. I'll mosey over afterwards and put him in the barn."

Redfern looked at Isabel. Their eyes lowered simultaneously. "I was just thinking about December fourth," Redfern said. "That's the date set for

hearing on the Government's petition against Hardin. It wouldn't be a bad idea if a witness or two went along, such as Caleb Wardell, for instance."

Jeff Bilbro studied the suggestion, rejected it. "Caleb will be needed here. He's rough and clumsy—not a good general at all. But with you gone, he's the only man left who can get the homesteaders together. Tell you what, Redfern, I'll go with you myself."

Redfern objected. "Trouble with that is, I'd hoped you'd stay in town and keep your eyes and ears open for a hint of Hardin's plans. If the homesteaders could get an hour's warning, it might make a lot of difference."

Bilbro got up. "I'll attend to that. There are men in town who don't like Hardin and his high-handed methods. They'll keep the homesteaders informed while we're gone. Redfern, you wait until nearer train time, then ride in, like I said. There'll be somebody waiting to take care of your horse."

Mary followed the doctor to the front door. "Jeff, you are being splendid. I can't thank you enough."

"For you, Mary, I'd do anything. Why don't you give me a chance to prove it?"

"Maybe I will, Jeff, if—"

"Yes, I know. If Isabel and Redfern get married. If Hugh becomes head of a family by marrying one of these settler girls and homesteads a quarter section. If you're left by your-

self, the way I am— All right, all right. I'll be seeing you, Mary."

"Goodby, Jeff."

An hour later Hugh had gone out to do the evening chores. Redfern was putting on his wraps at the back Isabel held his overcoat.

Her voice was pitched above its normal, soft contralto. It was shaken with a fear she tried to conceal. "Lanier, I'm glad you are going away for a while."

"Why, Isabel?"

"You ought to know why. Lanier, if anything should happen to you—" Her throat became tight.

He caught her, overcoat and all, and held her close. "Plenty of things could happen to me, Isabel. But whatever happens, I want you to know I love you."

He kissed her then, and her lips were warm, intense.

8

AT NINE o'clock of the forenoon of December fourth, a court crier banged with a gavel in the federal court room and spectators snapped to their feet. A large, gray-headed man in a black robe came in at a side door and seated himself on the rostrum. A deputy marshal announced his name—Judge Blaire Sanderford.

The crier orated, "O yes! O yes! The district court of the United States for the district of Colorado is now open pursuant to adjournment. Let all present give ear, and those who have complaints to make let them come forward and they shall be heard. God save the United States and this honorable court."

In a voice that was mild for a man of his size and dignity, the judge said, "Let the business of the court begin."

The clerk arose. "United States of America versus Travis Hardin. The Honorable Seth Weller for the Government; Ward Pendleton for the defendant."

"I have examined the file in this case," Judge Sanderford announced quietly. "I find that the principal allegation is admitted, namely, that the defendant, by a fence erected entirely on his own land, has in effect enclosed over twenty thousand acres of the public domain, as well as approximately seven thousand acres of homesteaded land." He paused and looked down. "Is the defendant present?"

A stout, smooth-faced man of middle age stood at a table below and to the right of Judge Sanderford. "Defendant is present only by counsel, your honor."

"Does the Government wish to offer evidence?"

Weller rose. "Only as to the urgency of the situation, your honor."

"Call your witnesses."

"Dr. Jefferson Bilbro and Mr. Lanier Redfern, please come forward and be sworn."

The witnesses came forward, held up their right hands while the oath was administered.

"Mr. Redfern will take the stand."

Redfern walked round to the witness chair and sat down.

After preliminary questions, Weller asked, "You live in Refuge Valley, do you?"

"Yes. Also, I have entered one hundred sixty acres, under the homestead laws."

"Has defendant herded cattle into Refuge Valley, within the enclosure described heretofore in the Government's complaint?"

"Yes, sir, about six thousand head."

"Does he keep them herded onto his own land?"

"They roam at will, sir, within the enclosure. They have broken down the fences of the homesteaders, trampled hundreds of acres of unfenced wheat, broken into hay lots and destroyed the hay ricks of several homesteaders—"

"Your honor," said Ward Pendle-

ton, rising leisurely, "all of that is irrelevant. The Government claims no guardianship over the homesteaders. This complaint relates only to unlawful enclosure of the public domain."

Judge Sanderford turned to Weller. "Does the Government undertake to safeguard the holdings of the settlers, Mr. Weller?"

"If the court please, the Government vests the homesteaders with fee simple titles, which, I believe your honor will recognize, contains the right of peaceable possession."

"But does the Government, by covenant or warranty, undertake to protect that right?"

"I'm afraid not, your honor," said Weller. "That is, not by a summary proceeding, such as this. The homesteaders may bring suit for damages and for injunctive relief against trespassers. The present action, however, is based upon trespass against the Government."

Pendleton got up again. "If the court please, I think the examination should be limited to matters of trespass upon the public domain."

"Do you agree with that, Mr. Weller?"

"I do, your honor."

"And what urgency is there respecting this type of trespass?"

"I know of none, your honor."

Redfern turned in his chair and faced Judge Sanderford. "Your honor, may I make a statement on that?"

"Of course," said the judge.

"Well, you see, there is at present an overlap or fusion of interests. Some of the homesteaders, like myself for instance, have only entrymen's rights, title being still in the Government. In situations like that, trespass against the homesteader is also a trespass againt the Government."

Judge Sanderford smiled, nodded his approval. "Are you a lawyer, Mr. Redfern?"

"I am a licensed attorney, your honor, though presently I am a homesteader."

"You have presented a vital point, Mr. Redfern. Please proceed."

"On this matter of urgency, your honor, defendant Hardin is trespassing against the orderly progress of homesteaders toward ownership of lands. Improvements have been made by the settlers by way of buildings, conversion of sod into cultivated fields, erection of fences, property in which the Government has an interest by reason of title retention and reverter of all rights, in the event of abandonment of the homesteads—a possibility that is rather forceful just now."

"You are getting to the point, Mr. Redfern," said the judge. "Go right ahead."

REDFERN looked at Dr. Bilbro, who nodded encouragement. "Well, your honor, Hardin's men have burned a number of buildings and hay ricks, his cattle have destroyed fences, and he has carried on a reign of terror for several weeks. Recently, in defense of their property against arsonists, homesteaders have shot some of Hardin's gunmen. We homesteaders recognize the urgent possibility of retaliation in force, with destruction of everything that will burn, and a virtual massacre of the homesteaders."

"Threats to that effect have been made?" asked Judge Sanderford.

"Yes. But, if your honor please, Dr. Bilbro can better testify as to that."

"In just a moment," said the judge. "How many men does Hardin have at his command?"

"Probably over a hundred by now."

"Thank you, Mr. Redfern. Will the next witness come up."

Jeff Bilbro swapped places with Redfern.

Judge Sanderford regarded the robust doctor with kindly interest. "Doctors," he said, "are reputed to know more than anybody else about what goes on in society."

"They do get around," said Bilbro.

"Do you corroborate the testimony of Mr. Redfern?"

"Every word of it."

"What have you to say respecting the urgency of the situation in Refuge Valley?"

"Naturally I am a friend of the settlers, Judge. They are the folks who will build up the country. That doen't mean I am hostile to other people, except when they set themselves against right and honesty. As to urgency, I have heard Hardin himself say that if this court orders his fence destroyed, he intends to burn out the homesteaders, lock, stock and barrel. He will then have Refuge Valley, regardless of the fence to which the Government objects. He claims the homesteaders have made war on him and that he now has ample excuse to wipe them out. It is true, Hardin has lost some men, but it was only because they have been burning property and hanging what they call nesters. Mr. Redfern failed to tell you that farmers had been sleeping in their barns and haystacks for almost a month, expecting just the thing that happened."

"What thing was that?" Ward Pendleton asked with sudden impatience.

"A few nights ago," returned Dr. Bilbro, "Hardin's men distributed their object, as events proved, being to set fire to every barn and haystack at the same moment. A few attempts succeeded; others failed because the arsonists were met by buckshot and bullets."

"How do you happen to know all this?" asked Pendleton.

"I doctored about twenty of Hardin's men," said Bilbro. "They told me what happened. They also intimated strongly that when they recuperated they'd even the score against the homesteaders. Next time they'd burn the nesters in their own houses."

Judge Sanderford leaned on an elbow and said with quiet gravity, "How soon, Dr. Bilbro, do you expect Hardin to undertake execution of his threat?"

"My guess is, in about six days from now. Most of his wounded men will be able to ride again by then."

"Thank you, Dr. Bilbro. You may resume your seat with Mr. Redfern." The judge addressed the defendant's attorney. "Mr. Pendleton, I presume you concede that defendant's conduct in the premises has been, and is, illegal?"

Pendleton got up. "In view of recent court decisions, your honor, I cannot insist otherwise."

"All right," said Judge Sanderford, "an order will be entered for abatement of the nuisance. Call the next case."

●

On their way back to Radnor, Dr. Bilbro and Redfern had something to be thankful for—a court order had been promised.

"But," said Bilbro, "it will take more than a piece of paper."

"That isn't what's worrying me, Doc. It's the delay. Courts are not noted for speed. Whatever is done, it may be too late."

Snow was falling at dusk. Hours later, peering through the glass of a coach window, they could see the world vaguely. It lay flat and white, and the snow fell gently.

"I'm glad the wind's not blowing," said Bilbro. "With all that snow to pile in drifts, this train would never make it to Radnor."

"There's another side to that, Doc. This snow is going to cover a lot of grass in Refuge Valley. If Hardin moves against the homesteaders, he

may want to save their hay for himself. That means he would burn houses, instead of barns."

"Maybe this snow will hold him off a while," said Bilbro. "Time is important, as never before, to the homesteaders."

"On the other hand, Doc, what happened in court today may force Hardin to immediate action. He's no doubt had a telegram from his lawyer before now. That will certainly set him to thinking."

When their train stopped at Radnor, snow was still falling. It lay almost a foot deep. Bilbro and Redfern got off the train without being observed by anybody who looked like a gunman. They trudged off to Dr. Bilbro's at once, taking to a side street, keeping in shadows.

"You can spend the night with me, Redfern," Bilbro announced when they had reached the house.

"Thanks, Doc, but the Snowdens will be expecting me. They'd worry, if I didn't show up."

"I can understand that, all right. Wish they were expecting me, too."

"You never can tell about that, Doc."

Bilbro went to the barn with Redfern, held a lantern while Redfern bridled and saddled his horse. "Hope you find everything safe out there."

"Same here," said Redfern. He swung aboard. "I'll give them your regards, Doc. I'll tell them, too, what a fine service you did them today in court."

Bilbro let him out at the gate. "If I know anything, young man, it was you who saved the day in court. Weller was ready to let you down. Sometimes, I figure, a client knows more than his lawyer. Goodnight and good luck."

Redfern felt in his warbags for a belt and sixgun he had left there. He found what he sought and buckled it on. "I don't know about the luck, Doc," he said, examining the gun to make sure it was loaded. "But you can always remember one thing; if we go down, we'll go down fighting. From now on, we've got to face it, good or bad. Goodnight."

HE RODE out and headed for the main street of Radnor. Lights glowed dimly from eating places and saloons. Stores were closed. There was no one on the street.

West of town the land lay flat and obscure in the darkness. But snow, even on a murky night, reflected a little light, enough to guide a lone rider across the flat, soft carpet of the earth. At the Hardin toll gate he was not challenged; the small guardhouse there was dark.

Soon afterwards he saw a light, now dim in the snowfall, now bright as precipitation slacked, then obscure as the flakes fell fast again.

He made his presence known at the house, lest he ride into an ambush at the barn. He dismounted, trudged up the path, up the steps and onto the porch. "Hello, in there!"

He heard running feet. The door was flung open. All three of the Snowdens were there, framed in light.

"Lanier!" Isabel was in his arms instantly.

After seconds, Redfern said, "Thought I'd better knock before I started prowling round the barn. I'll put up my horse—"

"You come in here," Hugh shouted. "I reckon I still know how to put up a horse."

"Of course," said Mary. "We're so glad to see you, I'd be willing to put up the horse myself."

They dragged him in.

While Hugh hurried to the barn and Isabel and Mary heated food and coffee, Redfern went up to his room and got into dry clothes.

Afterwards they sat in the living room. Between bites of food and sips of coffee, Redfern told about his trip. "Doc Bilbro was a real hero," he said, by way of summary. As he gave an account of Bilbro's part in the trip, he observed slyly that Mary was listening closely, happily, proudly.

Then Redfern turned to Isabel. "How is school?"

"We haven't given up yet. A few pupils have quit, but we still have enough."

"And," said Hugh, "we men have got ourselves organized. If you see a smoke or a fire in any direction, that means we're to grab our guns and come riding fast. If Hardin tries anything, he'll sure have a fight on his hands."

"If it's left to us homesteaders to fight him unaided, it will be a one-sided fight," Redfern told them frankly. "What we need is time. What the Government will do, I don't know, but I'm sure hoping it will be something, and soon."

"But will the Government do anything at all?" asked Mary, worriedly.

"Yes," Redfern said stoutly, "I genuinely believe it will."

With that opinion to comfort them, they went to bed.

Another day passed, and nothing happened. Then another.

On the third day, Dr. Bilbro got up early and went to his office. A townsman came running toward him through the deep snow.

"Doc, this is the day. Hardin's sending his men out. They're to keep low along the river and ride in from the northwest. Hardin himself and about twenty others have followed part way. Hardin's bunch are going to make a feint from the east, but the men from the other direction are to do the house burning—and what killing proves to be necessary."

"Has anybody taken word to the valley?"

"I'm afraid not, Doc."

"Then it's high time," said Bilbro.

He hurried back to his house, buckled on an old forty-five, ran to the barn and saddled his best horse.

But as he rode by the railroad yards he saw a spectacle which brought him to a halt. A train of boxcars had pulled in from the east. Cavalry horses were being led down gangplanks from the cars. Bilbro estimated their number at two hundred.

He wheeled his horse toward the yards and pulled up before a group of soldiers, getting ready to mount.

"Who's in command?" Bilbro shouted.

An officer strode forward. "I am, sir. Major Jared Fox. What would you have?"

"Major, I'm Dr. Bilbro. Travis Hardin and about a hundred men have left for Refuge Valley. Unless something is done, there's going to be a terrible tragedy out there. Can't you do something?"

"That's my business here, sir. My men have orders to abate a nuisance. That includes whatever is necessary to remove a fence and protect improvements, lawlessness might be construed as part of the nuisance." He turned and addressed another officer. "Captain Baines, mount your company."

Commands were shouted, and men swung up.

"Dr. Bilbro, if you care to volunteer, you may act as guide."

"Volunteer I will," said Bilbro. "What's keeping us?"

"All right, Captain," shouted Major Fox. "Follow the guide."

They rode two abreast up into the town and westward onto the snow-covered flats. The remainder of the cavalry followed a short distance behind.

SNOW HAD quit falling, but the sky was overcast.

After an hour's ride they saw smoke rising near the easternmost homestead. Bilbro led them straight through the deserted toll gate and then northwestward.

He rode alongside Captain Baines. "The real trouble is going to hit the homesteads from the northwest. You'd better ride ahead for about five miles, and be prepared for a fight. I'll wait for Major Fox and tell him what's up."

"At your service, sir," said the captain. He motioned with his right arm,

and the company moved with increased speed.

Dr. Bilbro pulled up beside Major Fox. "The real dirty work is due from the northwest, Major. Up there where you see that smoke, Hardin and about twenty men are staging a diversion, to draw the settlers away from their homes."

Major Fox motioned to an officer. When the latter had galloped up, the major pointed north. "Detach Lieutenant Collier's force; a small group of Hardin's outlaws are in the direction of the smoke. Have Collier wipe them out."

The captain dropped back; Collier's men swung north.

Gunfire commenced soon afterward, too soon to have come from the soldiers. The homesteaders had been tricked into leaving their homes unguarded; they'd gathered in the direction of the smoke signal.

A little later a messenger came back from Captain Baines. He rode up and saluted. "Major Fox, sir, there's quite a force two miles west, liquored up for dirty work. They've dismounted behind a wire fence and mean to fight."

"Tell Captain Baines to hold his fire, unless fired on."

"Right, sir."

The messenger rode back.

"We shall hit them from the south, Doctor. Would you like to go along?"

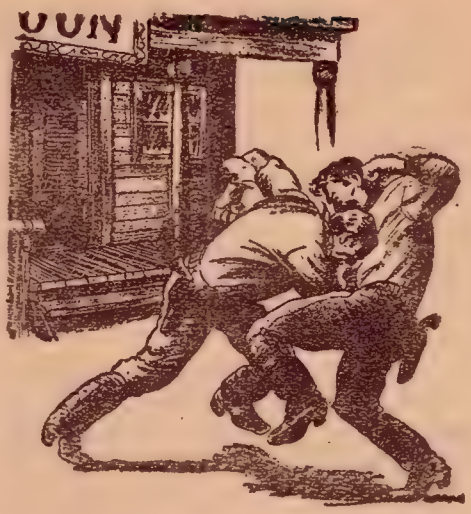
"I'd be delighted, Major."

They passed just south of the Snowden grove. Dr. Bilbro kept an eye on the house. A woman stood alone on the porch. Mary, of course. He wished she could recognize him now, riding like a hero. Maybe she wouldn't keep putting him off, if she knew.

At the southwest corner of the Snowden grove, Major Fox ordered his force to wheel to the north. The fight had started already. Soon they could see men lying in the snow, guns smoking.

Major Fox beckoned to his remaining captain. "All right, Fleming, it's your show."

"Yes, sir, Major," said the captain,



grinning happily. He lifted a hand, swung it briskly forward. "Charge!"

Hardin's gunmen, perceiving the flank attack on their side of the wire, rose and ran for their ho. es. Exposed thus, they fell in fast, irregular succession. Less than half of them gained their saddles. Fleming's men pursued survivors westward, dropping them one by one.

A bugler with Major Fox recalled them from the slaughter.

The major gave a series of orders and dispatched a messenger to Lieutenant Collier. Hardin's illegal fence was destroyed. His cattle were ordered driven northward onto the uninhabited upland plains.

"I am returning to town, Dr. Bilbro," the Major then announced. "Could I have your company?"

Bilbro scratched an eyebrow. "Well, now, Major, some of these homesteaders may have got hurt in the scrap. Maybe I'd better wait around and see."

Major Fox shook his hand. "You are right, Doctor. My men have orders to entrain and move east at sundown. If there's any further trouble, get me word before then. And thanks for your fine service."

"It was a pleasure," said Bilbro.

A couple of ambulance wagons had followed from town, medical officers

in charge. Bodies in the snow were examined, the living gathered up and hauled away.

Bilbro rode to the Snowden house and put his horse in the barn. He came back and knocked. Mary let him in.

"Oh, Jeff!" she cried. "I'm so glad to see you."

He hung up his coat and hat. Mary's face clouded. "What are you worried about now?" he asked gruffly.

"All this fighting—killing. And Hugh, Lanier, and Isabel."

"You ought to be mighty happy, Mary. The soldiers got here in time to save your houses. More than that, they've whipped the daylights out of Hardin's gang of cutthroats. Now they're destroying Hardin's fence and driving his cattle out of the valley. I'd say your troubles are over."

"I wish I could believe that."

Startled by a wild yell outside, they hurried to the door and looked out, Mary instinctively holding to Bilbro's arm.

Hugh and Redfern were riding at a fast clip through a lane in the grove, coming from the northeast. Hugh was yelling, waving his cap.

Redfern rode up by the yard fence. "Isabel is safe, ma'am. We just rode by the school." He pulled away toward the barn.

Mary looked into Bilbro's eyes, and in hers he saw happiness. "They're safe, Jeff. Thank heaven for that."

9

ONCE MORE an undertaker with wagons had come into Refuge Valley and hauled away dead bodies. That lonely spot outside Radnor, located on a rise of ground and with tragic significance called Boothill, presented before evening a series of mounds, yellow-gray dirt mingled with snow.

Each dead man paid for his own simple funeral, giving in exchange his horse and gear, in a few cases a little money. A board was set at each grave, bearing a name and date of death. No birth date was shown, nor any statement of origin. There was no certainty that any name was authentic.

These dead had cast their lot with lawlessness, at a distant time and under circumstances unrecorded. In a brief space their grave markers would fall and decay. They would then have become one with that nameless host who occupied countless boothills of Western valleys, gulches and plains; forgotten; unmourned; eternal only as Western Legend, of which they were a part, would grow and be eternal.

A few men and women of Radnor were there, lending an atmosphere of humanity, a spiritual touch, also with song and a reading of Scripture. Afterwards they tramped or rode back into town, where news of another kind was waiting for them.

Cade Crookshank, railroad telegraph operator, sent a message up to Shackford's hardware store. It was a small thing in itself, but it indicated that community of interest which existed between Government, railroads, businessmen, ranchers, and farmers. It was a telegram which read, *Blizzard moving southeast across Wyoming. Subzero temperatures. Warn stockmen.*

There were no stockmen in town, except a few survivors of Hardin's crowd, possibly Hardin himself. Certainly no one from Refuge Valley could be found; none could be expected for weeks. For desperation in Hardin's ranks would have created a situation of peril not to be dispelled in an hour, or a day. Nor was it a risk to be challenged heedlessly.

Dr. Bilbro looked at his watch. He had an hour of daylight left. "I'll go," he said.

He was at Snowden's again by dark.

They were as glad to see him as if he had been gone for ages.

Mary and Isabel had just announced supper. They set another plate at once.

"Looks like I'll have to stay all night," said Bilbro. "Word has come in that a blizzard is on its way. It will hit here at any hour. People ought to know about it, so they can get their stock under shelter."

"Well, Hugh," said Redfern, "that means work for you and me. While you see about things here, I'll head for Wardell's, spreading word as I go."

"Our stock's in," said Hugh. "I'll ride, too."

"You must eat first," said Mary.

"At least drink your coffee," said Isabel.

They drank and went out with food in their hands.

By midnight they were back, and snow was again falling.

While they put up their horses, Hugh told about his trip. "I went as far as Steve Bennett's. And say! You ought to see that oldest girl of his. Paulina Bennett. She's fourteen, and what a beauty."

"How much rope can we dig up around here?" asked Redfern.

"Five or six hundred feet, I guess. You know, Lanier, if Paulina and I got married, I'd be head of a family, wouldn't I?"

"You might flatter yourself into thinking so. Where is that rope?"

"Saddle and gear room, hanging about on pegs. As head of a family, I wouldn't have to wait till I'm twenty-one in order to enter a quarter section, would I? If you're married, age doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"Bring your lantern and let's get that rope. If blizzards cut up here like they do in Wyoming, we'll need a rope from house to barn. When one of those cow-killers sweeps across country, you can't open your eyes, much less see where you're going."

They found coils of rope, fastened an end at a barn entrance and strung from there by way of gates to the back porch.

Dr. Bilbro, Mary and Isabel had waited up. They came out to see what was going on. Again there were exclamations of gratitude, as if every moment was filled with hazard and any safe return from a journey was a near-miracle.

"It's snowing again," Dr. Bilbro observed.

"Turning colder, too," said Mary. She shivered. "Let's get inside."

Isabel had kept supper warm. Redfern and Hugh sat down and ate.

"Guess who I saw," Hugh said to Isabel.

"Oh, some bright-eyed little sodbuster, I suppose," she replied.

"Say, you ought to see her, Isabel. Paulina Bennett's no little thing, I can tell you. She's fourteen. And what a girl! You know something? I'm going to marry her and homestead one hundred sixty acres of land. And why shouldn't I? First thing you know, this land will all be entered. If I wait—"

"If you wait," said Redfern, "some other sodbuster will marry her. Then where will you be?"

"Say! You're right. And while advice is being passed around here—"

"Nobody is asking for advice," said Isabel.

"Especially where none is needed," said Redfern. He glanced at Isabel. He had expected to see sunshine; instead, he saw a cloud. "What's wrong, Isabel?"

"Wrong?" She forced a smile. "Who said anything was wrong?"

He studied her, saw fear where there should have been freedom and gladness. Then he remembered that she was a teacher, that school was a place where all sorts of gossip and rumors got around.

"It's something you've heard at school," he said, eyeing her severely. "Well, don't let it worry you. I've also heard it, and I'm not worrying."

"What have you heard?" Hugh demanded. "Quit talking in riddles."

"It was to be expected," Redfern said. "Since I signed that complaint against him, Travis Hardin has been saying that Radnor would never be big

enough for both him and me. He's got more reason now than ever before for saying that."

"Well, who does he think he is?" Hugh exclaimed.

"I'm grateful for one thing," said Isabel with forced cheer. "Lanier doesn't have to go to town. Certainly not any time soon."

"When he goes, I'll go with him," declared Hugh.

Redfern grinned. "But what about Paulina? She wouldn't want her lovey-dovey to get shot."

"Paulina can wait," Hugh declared warmly. "Besides, girls have nothing to say in matters of this kind."

"That's where you're wrong," Isabel cried, her eyes wet. "Girls do have something to say about it. Just because Travis Hardin says a town's not big enough for him and Lanier, is no reason for going to Radnor just to prove him wrong."

Redfern drank coffee and put down his cup. "I guess everybody's pretty tired. Anyhow, I am. So, I guess I'll turn in, if you don't mind."

ISABEL followed him. A stairway had come to be a place of parting, a symbol of grief. She clung to his arms.

"Lanier, please tell me you won't go to Radnor. Please!"

He kissed her quivering lips. "Isabel, we shall cross that bridge when we come to it. If I refuse to promise, you cannot take it as a denial of love. For you mean everything to me. Goodnight, beautiful."

"Goodnight, Lanier. Goodnight."

Not long had he been in bed, when something jarred and a great roaring swept past outside his windows. Storm had struck. His room was dark. Darkness outside was deep and terrible. Cold crept stealthily in and stung his face. It was a time when husbands and wives drew close together in their beds, when children covered their heads with their blankets and stabled cattle and horses paused in their eating of hay and listened fearfully.

It was a time, also, when imagination supplied what eyes could not see —trees bending under terrific wind pressure; ice crystals driving hard against everything in their path; earth-bound snow breaking its bonds and whirling away; badgers, prairie dogs, gophers, trembling deep in their burrows; cattle, caught upon vast unsheltered plains, moving slow and bewildered, tails to wind, stiffening in their legs, falling at last numbed and freezing.

Range born and bred, Redfern loved cattle. He visualized Hardin's six thousand cows, yearlings and calves, lost in black prairie night—doomed, every-one of them. He grieved for them, as he had always grieved for unsheltered wild things, beaten and killed by elemental fury.

There was no sleep for him that night.

Next morning he suspected that no one else had slept. For a change, breakfast was almost ready when he went down, as usual an hour before day.

Outside there had been no let-up. Rather, night's initial moaning roar had risen in pitch to screaming wails, with an undertone of undulating thunder. Spaces between double windows were packed with snow, so that nothing could be seen except by opening of a door, and then nothing except a torrent of whirling ice, moving so fast as

to produce an illusion of countless white threads streaming across night's black curtain.

It lasted through a day, another night, and into a second day. When it trailed off at last, it left a land desolated with ice, great drifts of hard-packed snow, leaning trees and twigs that crackled in twenty-below-zero cold.

Several days later word got around in town and from town into Refuge Valley that Hardin's cattle had died; that their frozen bodies dotted many square miles of prairie; that Hardin himself had become a silent, brooding maniac, financially ruined, loss of his lands by mortgage foreclosure inevitable; that he was waiting in town, drinking, constantly wiping his gun of every trace of oil that might cause his finger to slip—waiting for his day of vengeance, purporting to send word to Redfern by every man he talked to, daring Redfern to show his face in Radnor.

Then, a few days before Christmas, Lanier Refern announced that he was going to town to do his Christmas shopping.

He had given much thought to this day, lying awake at night while winds blew their melancholy notes through trees and round eaves and gables. He had no vain illusions as to what danger awaited him. Hardin was a killer, which meant he was fast with a gun. Hardin wore his gun low. When anticipating a fight, he wore a cut-away holster that required only a five-inch lift. That was a split-second advantage, especially to a man like Hardin, who fired at hip level. At close range that kind of fighter was deadly; an opponent unfamiliar with Hardin's method simply had no chance at all.

He chose a day in mid-week because then Isabel would be at school. He made his announcement suddenly, at lunch.

"Could I borrow your best team and sled, Hugh? I'm going to town this afternoon to do my Christmas shopping."

"Sure thing," said Hugh. "I'll go along."

"I'm going alone," Redfern said.

"You shouldn't go, either of you," said Mary. "Lanier, if Isabel knew this, she'd come straight home."

"That's what I know. That's why I'm going today."

"Now look here, Lanier," Hugh insisted. "I say I'm going along. You're not fooling anybody; you're going to town to have it out with Hardin. He won't fight you fair, and you know it. He'll have some gun-monkey hide in an alley, to shoot you from behind."

"If I'm not back by four o'clock, you can ride my horse in and get your team."

"Lanier, please!" begged Mary. "If you should get killed, Isabel would go crazy. You should think of her, as well as of your pride."

"It's not pride exactly. A thing like this confronts a man with a queer kind of necessity. There's no solution, except to kill or be killed. Perhaps someday men will think differently about such things, but until they do there's no alternative."

"It's a brutal idea," sobbed Mary. "But I suppose it's as you say—a necessity. You could go away, but I know you won't."

Hugh said nothing, but he was thinking. His face was tight.

10

REDFERN did not have to urge his team. Zero, and below, put action into them, as had weeks of idleness. He held them down to a lope, partook of their zest and fight against restraint, observed, fascinated, formation of frost around their distended nostriles.

Sled runners hissed as they slithered over ice and snow. His course was

straight for town—as straight as if he'd drawn two parallel lines with a ruler. Remnants of Hardin's illegal fence were covered in snowdrifts, solid packed. Refuge Valley was no longer a flat land of grass, but a choppy sea of snow piles; sharp ridges reaching windward, their backs to weeds or equally insignificant things which had stopped snowflakes in their mad flight, one crystal driving against another; hollow troughs lined with ice where wind had crowded upon itself and bored onward irresistably, leaving at bottom hardly more than bare earth.

His team would have gone round some of those obstructions, but he held them to their course, making of it a symbol of his own grim purpose in going to town.

Radnor was outwardly quiet. Twenty-foot snowdrifts lay against some of its buildings. Where they obstructed passage, gorges, even tunnels, had been cut through them, cast-up snow forming ugly, irregular walls along streets and walks. Radnor's main street, itself a trough for rampaging winds, had little snow on its main thoroughfare, though drifts lay in alleys and side streets.

Redfern hitched his team in front of Rowlett's general store, threw heavy blankets over them and buckled their straps underneath. He took off his heavy wolf-skin overcoat, folded it and weighted it down in his sled. For seconds he stood in clear view, leather jacket buttoned tight, sixgun holster tied down at his right thigh. There were several saloons in town, few eating places. He gave all of them a glance, then turned and tramped into Rowlett's.

Just inside he observed what he had often seen before in other times and places. His clothes grew instantly white, their sub-zero temperature turning moisture condensations to frost. Seconds later, as his clothes warmed, frost melted to water, so that his clothes were damp.

There were half a dozen men and women around a stove, a woman trading at a counter.

"Afternoon," Redfern said.

"Howdy, neighbor," two or three responded.

Then a rough looking man of thirty-five or forty detached himself and hurried out. Redfern, eyes now accustomed to interior gloom, watched him go, and he knew without being told that one of Travis Hardin's gunnies had recognized him.

This was a familiar pattern of history in Western frontier towns, from Dodge City to Abilene and Tombstone; from Laredo to Deadwood and Powder River. Hardly could a town be found that had not witnessed a final showdown between lawlessness and law and order. Lawlessness had often enjoyed temporary ascendancy. Then it was challenged. Sometimes Vigilantes wrought havoc upon criminal elements. Sometimes a hard-visaged town marshal matched gun with gun —and not a few of them lost their lives to killers with faster guns.

Here was a pattern more true to history—an individual who had provoked a tyrant's wrath; a young man, possessed of envy-stirring good looks and intelligence, and clean honesty that aroused spite and murder in vicious men; a man of courage, warned to get out of town, or to stay out of town, or told that a particular town was not big enough for him and his enemy.

As part of this pattern, there were say that it was here at this corner; or over there by that saloon; or down there in Main Street, just opposite Jensen's saddle shop; or at Flannery's bar, at close range.

As part of this pattern, there were messengers, too, men who hurried from one adversary to another, carrying messages, pretending friendship not infrequently treacherous.

A man strolled into Rowlett's store, a thin-faced, hardened fellow with a sneaky look. "Howdy, Redfern."

Redfern nodded. "Howdy."

"You in town looking for Travis Hardin?"

"I'm in town doing a little shopping."

"Just thought I'd tell you. Hardin's at Flannery's."

Redfern turned his back. "That's of no interest to me."

This was messenger number two. He went out.

REDFERN bought bonbons, nuts, candied fruits. He paid for them, went out and placed them in his sled. He glanced diagonally at Flannery's saloon. Its door swung open and Hardin strode out, bareheaded, gun leather tied fast to his right leg, jacket buttoned close, gun in cut-away holster. Redfern turned and walked back into Rowlett's.

He stood with his right side close to Rowlett's stove.

An onlooker said, "Ain't you afraid your gun will go off?"

Redfern moved a step aside, took out his gun and examined it. He wiped it with a handkerchief, moved its cylinder, dried it as it turned. "I reckon a gun might go off, if a man got it too hot." He dropped it back into its holster.

He thought of something else he wished to buy. Again he went out. Again Hardin plunged out of Flannery's.

"Why don't you come on out?" Hardin shouted hoarsely.

Redfern turned and walked leisurely back into Rowlett's. Again he stood where heat could strike his gun.

An onlooker said, "You've heard of Hardin's threats, no doubt?"

"What threats?" Redfern asked, eyebrows arched under his fur cap.

"He says this town's not big enough for you and him. He stays crazy drunk most of his time. Has his cronies watching for you. There's one standing inside Flannery's window."

"So I noticed."

He bought another article and took it out.

Hardin came out and stared at him. "You're a coward, Redfern."

Redfern turned and strode into Rowlett's. Again he warmed his right side.

In Flannery's several men stood around, watching, waiting. A red-hot stove and wet sawdust combined to raise humidity to saturation. Furniture and bar glasses were damp. Hardin, coming back from his challenge to Redfern, frosted over for seconds. His face became wet.

"Looks like you might have to go in after him, Travis," a crony told him.

Hardin laid an arm along Flannery's bar. "Whiskey."

His big, square face was pink, his eyes red from too much drinking.

"He's coming out, Hardin," a man snapped.

Hardin whirled and dashed out. He stood spraddle-legged and shouted insults. When Redfern turned and again disappeared, Hardin strode back in. Damp air condensed upon him, as before. An instant he was gray with frost, then damp; his leather jacket was wet and glistening.

"He's a coward, like I've always knowed he was. Pratt, you go over there and tell him I said he's a coyote and afraid of his shadow. Tell him I said so. Tell him if he's got any manhood at all, he'll come out and prove it."

Pratt went out.

A man in Rowlett's nodded toward a front window. "Hardin's sending you a message, Redfern."

A few seconds later Pratt strode in. "It's no business of mine, Redfern, but Hardin would still like to know if you're looking for him. If you are—"

"But I'm not," Redfern said quietly.

"Hardin says you're a coward, Redfern."

Redfern tensed abruptly. "What do you say?"

"Like I said, it's no affair of mine."

"Then stay out of it," said Redfern.

Pratt left.

Redfern examined his gun again, made sure it was warm and dry.

He went out and walked rapidly past several doors to Shackford's hardware store. Shackford and two men were standing just inside. As he entered, Redfern glanced back toward Flannery's. Hardin had strode into Main Street, bareheaded, his fists swinging.

"You'll not get out of this town, Redfern. You might as well come on and face it; I'm going to kill you."

Redfern, door closed behind him, walked past Shackford. Once more he let heat waves fall upon his gun.

Shackford came back. "We've heard about it," he said. "You're Lanier Redfern. Staying out at Snowden's, in Refuge Valley."

"That's right."

"Hate to say it, Redfern, but if you don't get out of town, you're going to get killed. Hardin blames you for his misfortunes. If you'll agree to it, I'll bring your team and sled down. You can hop in and be gone before Hardin has a chance at you."

"You're mighty generous," said Redfern. He examined his gun, found it dry, its trigger, hammer and cylinder working smoothly.

"You mean you'll head out if I get your team?"

"What do you think?"

Shackford, a gaunt merchant of near sixty, shook his head sadly. "It's plain enough; you won't do it."

Redfern bought a box of forty-five cartridges. He went out, walked back to his sled, dropped his purchase.

Hardin was out again, heading toward him.

Redfern turned quickly and walked away. Snow had been shoveled from planks in front of stores. He passed out of sight behind a snowbank and was concealed for several steps. When he glanced back, Hardin had stopped.

ABOUT TO turn into Shackford's again, Redfern halted. Coming into town at a dead run was his own big sorrel, a slim rider urging him on. He stopped at Shackford's hitch-rail and Isabel Snowden swung down.

She ran to Redfern, put her arms around him. "Lanier, thank heaven you're safe."

He held her at a distance. "Why did you come here?" he demanded harshly.

"To beg you, Lanier. Please, let's go home—now."

"You would make a coward of me, Isabel. Come inside."

She sank down, her hands digging at snow. He picked her up, carried her inside and put her in a chair. "You're not in this, Isabel. You were not supposed to know anything about it. Now, stay where you are. I don't like to be severe with you, but you had no business coming." He moved away, warmed his gun once more, waited until its film of moisture was gone.

He started out.

Isabel sprang up. "Please, Lanier let me talk to you, if only for a minute. I know you won't do what I want you to, but you can at least listen."

"All right," he said angrily, "I'm listening."

"I've had much to forgive, Lanier. You know that. But I have forgiven you for almost killing my brother. That can mean but one thing—that I love you. I guess you don't understand love, as a woman does. You don't have to go out there—you don't have to prove anything to me. I know you are brave, and good and kind. Nobody will ever think of you as a coward. You don't have to be a gunfighter; you have a better weapon. Haven't you proved it already? We need you. This town needs you. We need you in Refuge Valley. You'll be no good to anyone when you're dead and buried." She talked and talked.

He listened until he could stand no more of it. "Isabel, sit down. And stay put. If you come out of this store, you'll only make things more difficult for me. You might cause me to

miss my one chance. If you want to help me, do as I say."

Isabel sat down and hid her face.

He heard her weeping as he went out. He saw Hardin disappearing into Flannery's. Redfern waited seconds. Then, instead of turning back toward Rowlett's, he ran away a couple of hundred feet, then leaped over a ragged snowbank and stopped midway of Main Street. He turned there and faced back.

Hardin came lunging out from Flannery's. He stood with legs apart, hair tangled, right hand poised near his gun. For some reason he did not advance—not at once. He seemed to be waiting for something.

"All right, Hardin," Redfern called. "This is what you wanted. I'm coming to meet you."

Hardin stood in mid-street, waiting—for what, Redfern did not know.

Redfern advanced slowly, conscious cruely of sub-zero cold biting at his hand.

"I'm meeting you halfway, Hardin."

They were four hundred feet apart. Hardin stepped forward, not rapidly, but deliberately, not hunched tensely, but erect, as a fighter who intended a quick shot with gun barely free of leather.

Redfern moved a little more quickly, his hands gloved, yet numbing slowly. Hardin, he observed with satisfaction, wore no gloves. There was no sunlight. Hardin was a dark blot against snow and murky sky. Doors to right and left opened, their hinges squeaking. People were coming out to watch a man get killed.

A rifle cracked on Redfern's right, its report coming apparently from a roof. A man groaned on his left and a little back of him. Another rifle cracked, that one from a roof on his left. A man screamed, abruptly hushed.

Hardin mysteriously slowed his steps. He took quick glances to right and left; some of his savagery seemed to have gone out of him. He had lost arrogance.

They were now two hundred feet apart, moving more slowly, both of them. This was dangerously close. Every step forward tilted advantage toward Hardin's side. Soon he would be close enough for a quick hip-level fusillade.

Redfern stopped. "All right, Hardin, your time has come."

Both went for their guns.

Hardin's came up so fast its movement could not be followed. But something went wrong. He clawed at his gun with both hands, saw too late that ice had locked it. Frantically he shoved its hammer back, ice shavings spraying from each of its sides. He faced Hardin, then, and triggered. His gun blazed, but a lifetime—an age—had passed.

Redfern had been fast, but also deliberate. Ice on Hardin's gun, as Redfern had hoped, became his ally. Redfern's bullet knocked his adversary off balance, jarred his breath out. Hardin fired wildly, seeing Redfern as a fading blur. Again Redfern triggered, and then he lowered his gun into its holster. He had seen a dot appear directly in front of Hardin's heart. He did not wait to see Hardin fall, but turned back toward Shackford's store.

HE HEARD yells, saw men dropping from roofs into snowdrifts, saw them waving and running toward him. One by one he recognized them—Hugh Snowden, Caleb Wardell, Steve Bennett, Tim Shivers, Hank Moody—a dozen others. Asa Powers, even. Asa was among those first to wring his hand.

"We knew Hardin wouldn't play fair," Hugh shouted excitedly. "That's why I went for Caleb and others. Sending Isabel on a fast horse to delay you was Caleb's idea. It gave us minutes we needed to get in town and hide. We sure gave Hardin's back-shooters what was coming to them."

"But, man alive!" exclaimed Asa. "If it hadn't come off mighty quick,

we'd have froze to death up there behind those false fronts."

"It wasn't so quick," Redfern told them, his face haggard. "In this last hour I've lived twenty years." He shoved through their circle. "Excuse me one minute; there's somebody I want to see."

He hurried his crunching steps. Isabel ran to meet him.

"Oh, Lanier, Lanier! I m so glad it's over."

He held her in his arms, then led her toward Rowlett's general store. "We've got to get inside, Isabel. If you cry out here, your eyes will freeze."

There was quite a gathering in Rowlett's. It was time for sodbusters to do their Christmas shopping. They were in a happy mood.

Caleb Wardell slapped Redfern's back. "We'll have a celebration like never was seen in Refuge Valley." He winked at Isabel. "Won't we, Miss?"

Isabel looked at Redfern, her eyes brimming.

"Tell him yes, Isabel. Tell him we're going to get married."

Isabel could not speak. She nodded.

"Fine!" said Caleb. "We'll all be there with presents, too; we'll make it an event. We owe it to both of you."

A door opened and banged.

Dr. Jeff Bilbro strode into their midst. "I've just got back from seeing a croupy baby. Why hadn't somebody told me what was going on? I'd have been here, with my hardware, too." He grabbed Redfern's hand. "Son, if Hardin had hurt you, I'd have strangled him with these two rough hands of mine. You've done plenty for all of us. I've got a feeling that Radnor is going to be a good town after this." He paused, looked at Isabel, lifted her chin with a knuckle. "Isabel, when's it going to be?"

Isabel sobbed, then smiled. "What's wrong with a Christmas wedding, Doctor?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Bilbro looked around. Men were laughing as they traded. For Rowlett it was beginning to look like a sell-out. "Well, from where I stand," said Bilbro, "it appears like nobody's in a hurry to get home. You know how anxious everybody's going to be in Refuge Valley. Guess it's up to me to ride out and tell 'em what's happened."

He shoved out, a new eagerness in his step.

Redfern led Isabel to a counter where fine piece goods were to be had. "You will have to work like fighting fire, beautiful. Do you think you can make a wedding dress by Christmas?"

"I could for you, Lanier. I could do anything for you."

"Like riding in to detain me long enough for your sodbuster friends to reach town and get in on my fight," he said, grinning. "I thought for a while there that maybe you were sure enough in love with me, judging by your talk and acting."

"I do love you. Truly, truly I do. I knew I couldn't stop you, but I could hold you back for a little while; at least I hoped I could. And I did, didn't I?"

He put an arm about her shoulders. "Except for you, I'd have been a dead sodbuster right now. Since I'm not, and my life is yours, what are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to keep it—as long as I live. I'm going to make it a blessing not only for you and me, but for many, many others, as well."

"And I," said he, "am crazy enough to think you can do just that."

★

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE
A "Judge Steele" story by Lon Williams
is in the October **WESTERN ACTION**

Strange indeed was the appearance in town of a rancher complaining of rustled stock. To the marshal, and sixty good citizens, this meant instant pursuit of the badmen. But to Rakehell Jones and Piute Pete, it was doubly significant that there would now be sixty less men in town.

PISTOL PATRIOTS

Novelet

by John Jakes

PUFFS OF cloud scudded along before a brisk wind beneath a brilliant blue summer sky as the small caravan made its way along the north bank of the Rio Grande. The caravan consisted of one canvas-topped wagon and two men. On the seat of the wagon, lazily holding the reins of the team and humming to himself, sat a giant black-haired man with bronzed features, a hawk's nose and black, friendly button eyes. This person went by the name of Piute Pete, and unknown to all but his pardner, his name had originally been Homer Riffletock, when he dwelt as a youth on the teeming island of Manhattan. Here, in the south of Texas during the late sixties, Piute Pete was his handle, since for some obscure reason he boasted himself a member of that worthy and fierce Indian tribe. Piute Pete wore simple clothing; black trousers and vest, a red shirt and a black tall-crowned hat with an eagle's feather sticking jauntily up from it.

His companion, several years older, rode beside the wagon upon a gray horse. He went by the name of Dr. Rakehell Jones, claiming descent from Sir Percival Jones, one-time confidante to his majesty Charles II of England. Although many regarded the story as false, Rakehell Jones nevertheless assumed a colorful air on the frontier because of it. From what temple of higher learning Jones had acquired the title *Doctor* was also unknown, which bothered Jones not one whit, since he never deigned to reveal that information. He wore brown trousers, a brown coat, black string tie and flat-crowned brown hat. One could tell he was a gentleman. Both members of the caravan, however, were equipped with a brace of Colonel Colt's repeaters apiece.

As he rode along, Rakehell Jones (called Rakehell, he stated, because Sir Percival, his ancestor, has been addicted to violence, wine, sword play and bawdy women, hence called a rakehelly) puffed meditatively on an imported Cuban cheroot. Of a sudden, from the leafy south bank of the Rio Grande a shout went up, which caused Piute Pete and Jones to exchange startled looks.

"Greengos!" the shout went up

"Believe me, gentlemen, I can back off in time, and I can fire a shot that will explode the dynamite as it falls."

again. Jones motioned the wagon to a halt as a band of some thirty riders broke from the trees and plunged into the sparkling waters of the Rio, riding pell mell toward the wagon and shouting oaths and laughing at the top of their lungs. One man became so joyful that he fell out of his saddle into the water, where he was left to splutter for himself.

Piute Pete frowned at his companion. "What are they, Doc?" he grunted. "Bunch of Mex bandits?"

Jones examined the approaching riders. "I think not," he said. "They all have the faces of Americans, though they are obviously disguised in those serapes and sombreros. And," he added, his eyes growing flintly, "they look ninety percent drunk, and itching for some sort of hi-de-ho." Quietly Jones flipped back his coat, exposing the matched butts of his Colts winking in the sun.

The first of the riders plunged up the bank, water spraying from the horses' bodies, and gathered around the wagon in a half circle. All were heavily armed with dirks, Colts, single-shot pistols, and here and there Jones caught sight of an old-fashioned Spanish musket. All the men were bearded, but unmistakably Yankee, except for one or two who might have been breeds. The leader, with narrow-set blue eyes, looked more villainous than any of them.

"What you two gringos doin' out here all by yoursels?" the leader asked, winking broadly and reeling a little in his saddle. A powerful alcoholic cloud arose from the entire company. Jones noted three bottles being passed from hand to hand.

"I regret to inform you that it is none of your affair," Jones replied coldly.

"Hey, Duke!" another of the rowdies crowed, "what language is the jasper talkin'?"

Duke, the leader, guffawed and leaned forward until Jones thought he would surely fall off his horse. "What you wearin' them *pistolas* for, gents? Decorations?"

"If you do not move out of the way," Jones said calmly, "you'll find out."

"Aw, don't get sore," Duke said with mock apology. "We're only funnin'."

"I do not appreciate your humor," Jones replied.

Duke urged his horse forward until he and Jones were facing one another. The reek of bathless hide mingled with the aroma of liquor. Duke laid a chummy hand on Jones' shoulder. "Come on, pal," he said, winking. "I wouldn't want to rough up your fancy duds any. What you got in that wagon? Some redeye, maybe?"

JONES DETERMINED that this was the moment to act. His right hand flashed downward, then up, and the blast of the Colt sent Duke's horse whinnying backwards in panic. The shot had singed Duke's eyebrows and blown his sombrero clean off. Duke's expression changed from confusion to one of venom. An angry growl went through the band of horsemen. In a twinkling Jones had his other Colt in his hand. The sun gleamed brightly on the barrels as he said coolly, "No one will reach for his weapon."

"I'm gettin' mad, friend," Duke growled, massaging his burned eyebrows.

"That's no concern of mine," Jones replied. He turned to his companion. "Pete, do we have any *dynamite* in the wagon?" He emphasized the chosen word. Piute Pete hesitated, then a grin broke onto his bronzed features.

"Coming up, Doc," he exclaimed, and he disappeared into the wagon. A moment later he came into sight again, and handed Jones a large wicked-looking red firecracker. Eyeballs rolled among the horsemen, and bottles were pressed quickly to mouths in an effort to regain lost courage. *"Dynamite?"* The uneasy whisper rippled through the crowd.

"Exactly, gentlemen," Jones bluffed.

He had replaced one of his Colts in its holster. He now held the firecracker in his left hand at arm's length, and he swung the barrel of his right hand Colt so that it was accurately lined up with the cracker. "I meet violence with violence," he said carefully. "Either you high-tail it back across the Rio in less than a minute, or I'll toss this stick into the air. Believe me, gentlemen, I can back off in time, and I can fire a shot that will explode the dynamite as it falls. If you don't believe me, you have reserved seat tickets, one way, on the first train departing for paradise." Several of the men blinked drunkenly at the speaker, too liquored up to care what happened. The rest, however, began to back their horses rapidly, and the result was a tangled confusion of men and horseflesh.

At the water's edge, Duke turned and glared back at Jones. His face had lost its slackness, its drunken humor, and it was completely hateful now. "I ain't letting this pass, mister. If I ever meet up with you, again, you'll get a bullet in the belly, and I ain't just funning."

Jones raised the firecracker a little higher. "Train leaving in ten seconds," he announced. A terrified *"Wow!"* went up from one of the group, and the Rio Grande erupted into a splashing fountain as the riders plunged back across. The man who had fallen in during the first crossing and stood watching the whole proceedings, now slapped the water frantically in an effort to escape from the vicinity of doom.

Jones turned to Piute Pete, sure that the men would still be watching from the shelter of the trees on the opposite bank. "Start up the horses, Pete," Jones breathed. "As if we didn't have a care in the world."

"We almost had had trouble," Piute Pete intoned as the wagon began to roll.

"A near thing," Jones admitted from the side of his mouth. He found that his forehead was beaded with cold sweat, and only when the river curved and Jones felt sufficiently certain that they were screened from any further view of the bad men did he take out a handkerchief and mop his brow. "Peculiar," he said to Pete, "Yankees masquerading as Mexicans. I'm sure the government across the river would not appreciate the impersonation. Though I wonder why they do it." Jones shook his head, musing.

"They looked like they were plenty bad hombres," Piute Pete said, taking a cigar from his vest and placing it between his lips. "That Duke, he was mad enough to plug you."

Jones' eyes narrowed. "I would like to meet that Duke alone sometime. I have the feeling that he still considers himself insufferably superior, and that I cannot stand. I would like to demonstrate that I could beat him at any game he wished, daggers or Colts, whatever his choice. A man like that, so sure of himself that he will accost strangers, is a menace to law-abiding citizens."

Piute Pete could not supress his laugh, as memory reminded him of the many times he and his companion had been classed as far from law-abiding citizens throughout the course of their wanderings. He said, "Duke had plenty of guns to back him up."

"In a crowd men of that stamp are only worse," Jones commented. "Ah, well. Little use in thinking any more about it. I'll probably never see the rattler again. We are on business, aren't we?" He flashed a grin at his companion, who nodded. And so the little caravan passed on down the river's shore in the glow of the pleasant summer afternoon.

Within an hour they had reached their destination, the thriving community of Rio Bend, nestled in the curve of the river. Jones was pleased when he noted more than one street, as well as the number of two-story buildings, including three hotels, in evidence. Cattle pens and a main street thronged with wagons, men on horseback, dogs, children and women completed the picture of a comparatively

civilized community. Jones noted the size of the bank and its expansive facade with a gleam in his eyes, but then he reminded himself chidingly that those days were over. He turned his thoughts to other things. A banner strung across the main street between the second floors of the Mercury Hotel and the *Poison Bottle Saloon* proclaimed, *Mammoth Fourth of July Celebration Sponsored by the Rio Bend Eagle. Fireworks! Fireworks! Fireworks!* Jones pointed with pleasure at the banner and Piute Pete nodded, grinning. Jones finally caught sight of the offices of the *Rio Bend Eagle* and motioned for Pete to pull the wagon over to the left, which he succeeded in doing only after pelting oaths at two mangy hounds who insisted on nipping at the horses. Finally, however, Pete got the wagon stopped before the one-story frame building, and he and Jones climbed down, Jones slapping the dust from his trousers to make himself presentable. Pete began eyeing the street for eligible females until Jones pulled his sleeve and bade him follow into the newspaper office.

JONES CROSSED the porch and stepped into the room which ran all the way to the back wall. The smell of printer's ink drifted through the room, pleasing to Jones since he had once spent three months working in a printing shop in Philadelphia. A press worked busily, staffed by two ink-blackened youths. It slapped down ink-wet copies of the paper with a rapid hum. Jones hesitated just within the door, a smile on his lips as he swept off his hat. Of the four persons engaged in conversation by a large desk, one was a young and exceedingly pretty girl.

Jones stepped forward. The tall, white-haired man with ink on his hands and his leather apron he took for the editor and publisher, Thomas Rivers. Jones extended his hand. "Mr. Rivers, sir?" When the white-haired man said that was his name, Jones replied, "Allow me to introduce myself. Doctor Rakehell Jones, from up in Las Cruces. I have the wagon-load of fireworks which you requested."

Rivers seemed surprised. "I ordered that fireworks from Billy Sparks. He owns the big general store in Las Cruces, doesn't he?"

"He *owned* the general store," Jones replied affably, but emphasizing the tense. "I had an opportunity to engage Mr. Sparks in a game of three-card monte in the *Oh, Yes! Saloon* at Las Cruces, and during the course of the game, Mr. Sparks, ah..." Jones coughed discreetly, "...lost not only his bankroll, but the general store."

"That d a m n e d Billy," Rivers grinned. "Never could gamble worth a damn-sight. So you must have got my letter to Billy, Mr. Jones, asking for the fireworks for our fourth of July celebration, eh?"

"Exactly," Jones replied. "I managed the store for precisely one day, and though I have been many things in my time, from corset drummer to gambler, the retail business is not one to which I take with much enthusiasm. During the course of that one day, however, I received your letter. Mr. Sparks had contrived to get a loan from a personal friend, and I re-sold the store to him at much less than it was worth, not desiring to settle in Las Cruces. I nevertheless made a tidy profit, and since I knew you desired fireworks, I decided to keep that item for myself and bring it down in person. My companion and I like to see new country, you understand."

Rivers seemed stunned by the oratorical display, but he recovered himself. "Oh, certainly, Mr. Jones. You'll get your hundred without a doubt." He became aware of the awkward situation arising from lack of introductions, so he performed the honors. The young woman, black-haired and shapely, was Consuelo Rivers, his daughter. Jones swept his arm low in a bow.

"Your servant, ma'm," he murmured, kissing her hand.

He ignored the further startled ex-

pressions from Rivers and introduced Piute Pete, who grinned with child-like simplicity and greeted them with an all inclusive wave of his hand, not desiring to get entangled in the foolish business of shaking hands. The other two persons with whom Rivers had been conversing were respectively *Capitan* Manuel Perada in the uniform of the Mexican *federales,* a good-humored olive-skinned Latin, and Amos Hasty, a barrel-voiced, barrel-bodied man on whose vest reposed the star indicating he was town marshal. There was a brief patter of polite conversation, and then Rivers opened his desk and began counting money from a cash-box.

"By the way, marshal," Jones addressed Hasty, "do you happen to know a person by the name of Duke? Wears a beard and has an unpleasant character? I'm sorry that I cannot give you a more complete description."

"Duke?" Hasty frowned. "Why, that sounds like Duke Bagmon. Used to hang around the saloons here, picking fights. Puncher, sometimes, but he only did honest work when he couldn't find anything else, like cheating at cards!"

The last phrase stung Jones' ego, but he managed to keep his composure. "I think I met up with this gentleman today along the river," he said. "An obvious ne'er-do-well, in the company of a number of other gentlemen of decidedly low calibre."

Rivers, Hasty and *Capitan* Perada all exchanged glances, the significance of which escaped Jones. Then Rivers said eagerly, "Mr. Jones, tell us what happened. How did you meet this Duke Bagmon today?"

Jones described in detail the events that had transpired on the river's shore not long before, and even though he felt himself too old for the girl, he nevertheless dramatized slightly his handling of the situation, and he caught in return the gratifying gleam of admiration in her dark eyes. Piute Pete, on the other hand, politely leaned out the door and aimed a shot of chewed tobacco at the street, ejecting it with a loud and derisive *put!*

"Senors," Perada exclaimed when Jones had finished, "then there is our answer!"

"I think he's right, Tom," the marshal rumbled. "It's all a trick to throw us off the trail!"

"Duke Bagmon and Lance Lackdale used to be cronies, as I remember," Rivers declared with an attitude of triumph. He glanced significantly at his daughter. "Consuelo, I *told* you that Lance was back of all these raids!"

Consuelo folded her arms determinedly across her shapely bosom. "I refuse to believe it!" she announced, though a trifle unconvincingly, Jones thought.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Jones exclaimed. "I dislike to intrude, but since I feel that I have a personal stake in the affairs of this Bagmon fellow, I request that you inform me of what is going on. Duke, as he so fatuously calls himself, is obviously an anti-social character, and deserves a good thrashing. It would give me great pleasure to administer it." Jones' pride was still rankled at the contemptuous opening remarks of the man Duke.

"Very well, Mr. Jones," Rivers replied. "Sit down." They all drew up chairs, save for Consuelo who maintained her firm posture of arms-across-the-bosom stubbornness. "For about six months," Rivers explained, "the ranches around here have been plagued by rustlers running off cattle into Mexico. And the activities of this band hasn't been confined to rustling entirely, either. Three stages have been held up in the last two months, all of them carrying large shipments of money. The outlaws, whether in large groups on a rustling raid, or in smaller groups on a stage raid, always appeared to be Mexicans, or dressed that way. Whenever they appear at close range, like when they're holding up a stage, they are masked."

"Naturally, senor," Capitan Perada

put in, "when my government heard about this, I was detailed to investigate. If they are Mexicans, then my government will punish them. If they are not, then the American government will be in charge."

"If we ever catch 'em," Hasty snorted. "We put up with it for about four months until we got fed up, and swore in a passel of men as deputies. Then they switched to robbing stages."

"I can assure you," Jones said, "that the men dressed as Mexicans who accosted Pete and myself were *not* Mexicans but Americans all. It wounds me to say that, but it is true. And apparently this Duke person is their leader."

"And they're hiding out on the Mexican side of the river," the editor said. "But their leader, I think, is a man named Lance Lackdale, who says he's a lawyer, although he hasn't taken a case as long as he's lived in this town, which is some time."

"Dad..." the girl began angrily.

"I'm sorry, dear, but it's the way I feel. Mr. Jones," he began again, "this Lackdale has been paying court to my daughter, and I haven't been able to stop it, because we have no proof. Lackdale never moves out of town. But he and Duke Bagmon were great friends before Duke suddenly disappeared some months ago, and secondly, he knows which cattlemen have the smallest, most unprotected herds—as does everyone in town—but on top of that, he has inquired about stage time schedules the day previous to each robbery."

"I could beat it out of him," Hasty complained, "but t'wouldn't be legal."

"Suspicions, nothing but suspicions!" Consuelo raged.

RIVERS went on, "Yes, my dear. But well-founded suspicions. Lance Lackdale has no visible means of occupation, and he thinks he's smart enough to get by with running a gang of outlaws because we can't connect him with the gang, and can't get any proof. It's a downright disgrace. He knows how we feel, and he laughs! I'd throw him out of my home, Mr. Jones, but then he might think I had proof of his guilt and tighten up his operations. Then we'd never catch him."

"On top o'that," Amos Hasty said, "the bank is jammed with ranchers' cash right now, and we've been sittin' here for days, afraid this gang would make one big play and come right into town and rob us blind!"

"It sounds like a perfect target," Jones admitted.

"Anyway," Rivers said, rising, the ink-stained hands raised in a gesture of resignation, "that's as much as we know."

Jones also stood up. "Gentlemen," he said, "I would regard it as an honor and a pleasure if you would let me help you. Not only as a patriot wishing to prevent misunderstanding between this republic and that of Mexico..." he bowed low to Perada, who displayed a set of pearly teeth and also bowed, "...but to give this Bagmon fellow the true lesson that he needs. I have no quarrel with this Lackdale person, but if he is a friend of Duke's, he is poison on my list."

"Well..." Rivers said dubiously, glancing at Hasty.

"Help!" Consuelo exclaimed contemptuously. "I'm sorry, father, but I don't see how this—this Doctor Jones, as he calls himself, could *possibly* help!" Jones' pride received a wounding blow. He knew from the girl's gaze that she regarded him as a dude, a fop, a fancy dan so encumbered with vocabulary that he knew nothing of the more straightforward ways of action. He maintained his calm, but determined to give her a lesson she would not soon forget.

"Piute Pete," he announced calmly. "The cigar trick." Pete, understanding the attitude of the young girl, grinned with pleasure as he received the cheroot which Jones handed to him. He stepped outside and around the door. Jones calmly faced toward the street and fanned back his coat while the others watched with mingled ex-

pressions of puzzlement and apprehension. Abruptly the cheroot flew up into the air from beyond the doorway.

Jones watched it rise, then fall. His right hand swept downward swiftly, a Colt appeared as if by magic in his hand, and he gauged his shot so that the angle would be downward and the bullet would spend itself in the street a few inches from the board sidewalk, not endangering any passerby. The Colt exploded sharply twice, and the cheroot flew apart. Rivers stepped to the door and inspected the ragged strands of tobacco lying on the sidewalk. Jones blew deftly into the barrel of his Colt and replaced it in his holster.

"I apologize," Consuelo said meekly, not daring to look at Jones.

"I have a plan," Jones announced without further preamble. "I will gain the confidence of this Lance Lackdale and try to make him think I am sympathetic to his cause. I will see whether your suspicions are truly sound, and if so, whether or not he plans to have his men attack the bank, and if that is also true, when." Jones placed his hat firmly on his head. "I have one request, however. It will be essential that Miss Rivers reveals nothing to Lackdale about my association with you, let alone that I know you. I must ask that."

A stern fatherly glance from Rivers produced the girl's soft, "I promise." Jones suspected that, not being yet married to Lackdale, or even betrothed, she would follow her father's dictates in such a matter. "Mr. Lackdale, of course, may continue to pay his attentions to your daughter," Jones commented. "Come, Piute Pete." The big man preceded him out the door, where Jones turned. "Where might I find this Lance Lackdale?" he asked.

"Try the *Poison Bottle Saloon,*" Rivers replied, still mildly speechless.

"Senor Jones," Perada exclaimed effusively, "you are a true and honorable patriot! My government shall be eternally grateful!"

"Nothing," he replied with a wave of his hand. "Nothing at all." And with that, he proceeded down the street, Piute Pete at his side.

2

JONES OUTLINED his plan of action briefly but clearly to Piute Pete as the two moved along the board sidewalk, dodging in and out between more slow-moving pedestrians. In spite of the intenseness with which he spoke, Jones was never too occupied to overlook a female passer by, and he lifted his hat gallantly to each woman he chanced to pass. Several of the males loitering along the store fronts snickered derisively as they observed Jones' hat-tipping, but Jones was too occupied with his thoughts to pay them heed, or each one personally would have been forced into a retraction of the smirk.

Piute Pete rapidly caught the gist of the plan, and Jones left him sitting in one of the chairs on the broad front porch of the Mercury Hotel. Jones crossed through the sunlight, picking out a solitary octogenarian blinking pleasantly into the sun and sucking on a cold cigar, out in front of the *Poison Bottle Saloon.* Jones accosted the oldster who opened sharp blue eyes, and Jones decided that the man's sight seemed sound enough. "I wonder if you would do me a small favor, friend," Jones asked, taking a bill from his trousers pocket and slipping it back and forth between his fingers.

The oldster tottered to his feet. "Anything, pard, for that amount o' cash."

"I'm playing a little joke on a friend of mine," Jones whispered with the tone of a conspirator. "Step inside the saloon, and if you see Lance Lackdale, come out and tell me exactly where he is sitting. You know Lance, don't

you?" Jones inquired, his tone implying that the oldster was out of his wits if he didn't.

"Course I do," the oldster wheezed, toying with his suspenders. "Why, I see him here nigh onto every day."

"Good, good." Jones urged the man gently toward the door. The oldster reached greedily for the bill, but Jones held it away from him with a chiding shake of his head, making it clear the bill would change hands only after the mission had been accomplished. The oldster vanished through the batwings and the sound of the tin piano dinned louder for a moment. Then the oldster popped back out again, his hand grasping involuntarily in the air. Jones pressed the bill into his palm, not releasing it, however, until the oldster spoke.

"The rear table. Straight back. All by hisself." The oldster took up a line of questioning concerning the type of joke Jones intended to play, but Jones had already pushed through the batwings into the heart of the *Poison Bottle Saloon.*

First off, a trio of ladies of pleasure sidled toward him. Jones told them, politely but firmly, that he had other intentions. They stared after him, expressions of wonderment on their painted faces. Jones strolled past the crowded bar until he caught sight of the person at the rear table, Lance Lackdale. The man was between twenty-five and thirty, slender, with dark wavy hair, a pointed chin and a pleasant mouth. His clothes, conservative but obviously expensive, hung loosely on his slack frame. The man's expression was ruined by the pallor of heavy dissipation and the narrow, almost cruel cast of the eyes. Jones reached into his shirt pocket and extracted his deck of special cards. Lance Lackdale did not see him at first, as he sat blinking down dully at the half-empty shot glass before him. Jones riffled the cards and Lackdale looked up, hazily. Jones decided the man was mildly intoxicated. Apparently all the desperadoes of this region over indulged.

"A game, sir?" Jones inquired. "Your choice. I am Doctor Jones, just arrived in this fair town of Rio Bend. A gambler by profession. No man should sit alone in a palace of pleasure, my friend." Jones jerked out a chair with his boot and lowered himself with dignity into the seat opposite the bewildered Lackdale. "Come, come," Jones said, giving the man no chance to reply. "To insure my gambling companions of my honesty, I insist that no more than five dollars per hand be wagered." Jones added after a dry laugh, "At first. Now, what will it be?"

LACKDALE, a sudden insolent grin playing about his lips, sat up and took cognizance of the situation. He slapped a hand down on the table. "Poker. At five dollars a hand." Jones already felt a keen dislike for the man, who now seemed in control of himself despite the liquor fumes dispersed by his breath. Jones cut for deal, arranging it so that he lost, and Lackdale began to put out the cards for the first hand. Jones refused a drink on the grounds that it made him think less clearly. A shrewd glance of respect flickered in Lackdale's eyes for a moment. Jones lit a cheroot and picked up his cards. He saw by reading the backs of Lackdale's cards that he was in a position to lose, so he bet the full five dollars. Lackdale did the same, and took the pot. A smirk of satisfaction appeared on Lackdale's face, and Jones decided that the man was of the same stamp as Duke Bagmon, only slightly more refined. He noticed a pistol butt at Lackdale's right hip.

Jones took the next four hands, collecting the full five dollars from Lackdale each time. The man frowned irritatedly and tossed off the rest of his whisky shot. Jones, with his back to the door, had not seen Piute Pete enter the saloon, but he heard the distinct click of the Colt hammer and glanced up to see Piute Pete aiming the weapon at his chest, scowling.

"All right, you rat," Piute Pete

snarled. "I caught up with you. I want the forty dollars you took from me this morning." He turned to Lackdale. "Mister, I'll bet he's been cheating you, too."

Lackdale stared so intently at Piute Pete that he did not see Jones draw a Colt beneath the table and hold it there. Lackdale whirled around in his chair, eyes ranging. "Are those crooked cards, mister?" he hissed.

"They are," Jones replied cooly, drawing back the Colt hammer. Lackdale's eyebrows flew up at the sound. "That's quite correct. I have a gun trained on your stomach, and I will not hesitate to shoot at the slightest outcry." Jones allowed a smile to play about his lips. "However, I see no reason why I can't settle this reasonably with both you gentlemen. Your money refunded and a round of drinks for all. Agreeable?"

"That sounds all right by me," Piute Pete exclaimed, thrusting his gun away and sitting down with such haste that Jones feared he would give the whole thing away. Jones left the Colt resting in his lap as he returned twenty dollars to Lackdale, reflecting that the man had made a five dollar profit from the first hand. He counted forty for Piute Pete, summoned the bartender and had a bottle brought to the table. Lackdale helped himself eagerly.

"No hard feelings," Jones said, holstering his Colt.

Lackdale studied him shrewdly. "No, Doc, no hard feelings. In fact, I've got a healthy respect for any man who can make an extra dollar on the..." Lackdale uttered a small laugh, "...other side of the law." He leered sidewise at Piute Pete, but that person scowled so gleefully that Lackdale appeared satisfied. Lackdale drummed the tabletop with his fingers. "I take it you gents don't have too healthy a respect for the law. Am I correct?"

"You are," Jones advised him, confident now that things were working smoothly.

"I been locked up five, six times myself," Piute Pete put in with a show of teeth.

Lackdale ran his tongue over his lips. "Ah, would you gentlemen be willing to help out in a little—profitable venture I'm lining up? I need every man I can get who can use a gun, but I also need one or two men here in town. Lookouts." Lackdale watched Jones and Piute Pete for reactions.

Jones returned Lackdale's leer. "I'd be glad to help, if it would show a profit."

"How does a thousand dollars sound?" Lackdale said.

"It sounds too good to be true," Jones returned, reminding himself that he had better use simple language with Lackdale, or the man might grow suspicious. Piute Pete agreed that the prospect offered appeal. But much to Jones' consternation, Lackdale picked up his hat and rose from his chair.

"I've got some business to attend to at my office," he said. Jones noticed that he weaved slightly on his feet. "If you'll meet me here tomorrow morning around ten, we can work things out." With a wave of his hand he swaggered out of the saloon.

"We got him hooked, eh?" Piute Pete exclaimed after a moment. Then he noticed the frown creasing Jones' forehead. "Doc, what's the matter?"

"I dislike waiting until tomorrow morning to hear Lackdale's plan. Obviously he means to rob the bank, since he needs lookouts in town, but I had hoped some preparations for trapping him and his repugnant friends could be made by evening. We'll have to turn our attentions to that end, Pete." Jones lit a cheroot and stared meditatively through the smoke for some time.

THE RIVERS residence, a Spanish style home, stood in the section of town near the river. As the sun dropped into the west that evening, gilding the roofs of Rio Bend, Lance Lackdale walked briskly down the narrow street that led to the Rivers' front

gate. Jauntily adjusting his tie, he rang the bell pull, and a stout Mexican servant appeared a moment later. Lackdale inquired whether Miss Consuelo Rivers was receiving company, and the servant returned that Senor Rivers had returned later than usual from the newspaper office, and that the members of the household had just seated themselves for dinner. Frowning, Lackdale shoved the lackey out of the way with a palm to the man's chest. He announced he would wait. The gate closed, the bell vibrating faintly.

Jones and Piute Pete slipped furtively out of the shadows half a block down the street from the gate. They had been hot on the trail of Lance Lackdale ever since he left the *Poison Bottle* after his evening meal. Now, straightening confidently, Jones strode forward, Piute Pete beside him, and gave the bell rope a tug. The same portly servant appeared. "Is this the home of Mr. Rivers, editor of the *Eagle?*" Jones inquired.

"Si, senor."

Jones stated that he wished to see Rivers, received the identical story about the family being at the dinner table, and Jones said he would wait. He stepped into the flagged courtyard. The servant closed the gate after a fearsome glance at Piute Pete's bulk and vanished down a long arcade. Lance Lackdale turned away from the iron table set in the middle of the courtyard, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. He had already attacked the decanter of wine set on the table. A wine glass glinted in his hand. "Well, Jones," he said coldly. "What are you doing here?"

"Lackdale!" Jones exclaimed with false surprise. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I came to see Mr. Rivers' daughter."

"Well, a coincidence indeed. I came to see Mr. Rivers. I have yet to find a room suited to my tastes. The hotels are much too expensive. I thought I would advertise in the local newspaper, but I found it closed when I arrived a few moments ago. I asked a passer-by the way to the editor's home, wanting to be sure my request would go in tomorrow's paper. I have to be satisfied with temporary lodgings at the Mercury Hotel tonight."

"Oh." Lackdale studied him for a moment more in the blue gloom of early evening. Then he grinned loosely. "Well, the old horse is eating dinner, as you heard. Let's toss off a few," he indicated the decanter of wine. Jones poured a glass each for himself and Piute Pete. The latter grimaced sourly as he tasted, but a frown shot at him by Jones stopped his facial contortions.

Half an hour passed, during which Lackdale helped himself to one drink after another, becoming increasingly talkative. Jones and Piute Pete nursed their original drinks, as Jones plied Lackdale with leading questions. At last, considering Lackdale sufficiently drunk, Jones asked, "What is this stupendous operation in which we are going to assist?"

Lackdale seemed to snap out of his delirium as he had done earlier that day, but Jones leered so evilly that Lackdale said, "The bank. Yes, sir, the bank."

"The bank!" Jones cried softly. "You don't mean it!"

"But I do, I do!" Lackdale replied, putting his arm around Jones and swaying back and forth as he laughed softly. "You two are going to help take all the money out of the Rio Bend bank. How do you like that?" Jones indicated with a low whistle that he liked it indeed, disentangling himself from Lackdale's alcoholically affectionate grasp. Jones studied his wine glass carefully.

"But exactly when do you plan to accomplish this feat?" he asked.

Lackdale wagged a finger in front of his face. "Aha! That's the secret. But I'll tell you. Come here." Jones stepped closer, seizing Piute Pete's

shirt and pulling him along. Lackdale breathed overpowering fumes at them as he spoke. "Tomorrow," he whispered. "Do you know what tomorrow is?"

"The Fourth of July?" Piute Pete replied.

Lackdale slapped him on the back. "Right! The Fourth of July! Every single person in this town will be down on the river tomorrow night, watching the fireworks! Lots of fireworks!" Lackdale threw up his hands. "Bang! But we'll make bigger fireworks, because when they're all down at the river staring at the pretty fireworks..."

"...we'll rob the bank!" Jones finished in a hushed whisper, marveling at the deviltry implicit in the plan.

Lackdale struck Jones jovially on the back, too. "Right again! I'm glad I added you two men to my organization. I've got a fine organization, you know, but I'm glad as hell I added you two men to that fine organization!"

A sudden rattle of several horses sounded from the street outside. Jones drew up straight, suddenly alert. He shot a meaningful glance at Piute Pete as Lackdale whirled around. "Now what the devil's that?" Jones noted with apprehension that Lackdale seemed to grow more sober by the moment. He directed his steps straight toward the gate. Jones and Piute Pete both faced in that direction as the horses came to a stop directly outside. A furtive knock sounded at the gate.

"Boss!" a voice croaked. "Boss, is that you in there?"

LACKDALE had gained complete control of himself. In the gloom Jones could see the lines of his face grow harsh as his hand reached out to pull the gate open. Jones hesitated, not daring to draw for fear the voice was not what he thought it to be. If his suspicions proved wrong, he would give the show away for fair now. Piute Pete glanced at him anxiously, awaiting instructions.

Lackdale swung the gate open and a figure stepped inside, followed by two more. Jones saw with sinking regret that he had hesitated an instant too long. His fears proved to have good foundations, as Duke Bagmon emerged from the darkness of the street with his weapon already drawn. "Cover them, boss!" Duke hissed.

"Who?" Lackdale asked tensely.

"Those two!" Duke's finger shot out accusingly. Jones could not make out distinctly the figures of two additional members of the gang, although he did not recognize their individual faces from the encounter on the river earlier today. Piute Pete's hand dropped toward his Colts and Duke snicked back his hammer. "Draw and you're a dead man!" he exclaimed.

Lackdale seized the man's vest savagely. "What is this!" he exclaimed. "I told you never to come in town to see me!"

"Boss," Duke complained, "the men are getting jumpy. We already had two fights this afternoon. They want to get going on this big job. I hunted for you at the Pizen Bottle, but they said you'd already left. I figured you'd be here. I had to do something," Duke finished lamely, "or the men would of caused trouble." The grumbled assent of the other two followed.

Duke's eyes unfortunately, never wavered from Jones and Piute Pete, and his gun hand remained steady. Lackdale said with violence, "You fool! We can't stand here all night! Out into the street!" He motioned for Jones and Piute Pete, who obeyed without question. In the darkness of the street under the wall, Lackdale asked Duke, "Now explain things to me, damn your hide. These men are going to help us rob the bank."

Duke snorted with derision as he related the incident that happened along the river. Lackdale seized now Jones' coat front. "Is this true?" he exclaimed.

"And what difference does it make if it is?" Jones countered.

"It makes a lot o' difference!" one of the others spoke up.

"Who's that?" Lackdale hissed. "One-eye?"

"Yeah, it's me." There was a pause while One-eye expectorated loudly into the street. "I come into town ahead of Duke this afternoon. I recognized this dude's wagon out in front of the Eagle office, and I took me a look-see inside. I saw this dude and his pal, and they was confabin' with Marshal Hasty and that Mex feller came up to see about us lookin' like Mexes oursel's."

"Sneaking dirty..." Duke began with dogged anger.

"Lawmen!" Lackdale exclaimed with heartfelt disgust. "And I spilled my hand to them!"

Jones kicked out suddenly in the gloom and the person known as One-eye howled with unnaturally accented feeling. Jones gave a shout to Piute Pete, amid other shouts of, "Grab 'em!" and a steady stream of ungentlemanly language pouring from the lips of Duke Bagmon. Jones realized with a sinking feeling that quarters were too close, visibility too uncertain, for the use of Colts. He might accidentally strike down Piute Pete. But he heard a cry of pain from Piute Pete, simultaneous with a thud. And at that moment, something metallic clouted him on his own skull and he sank discouraged into black oblivion.

3

JONES HAD the unpleasant sensation of being carried to an unknown destination via horseback, with his stomach bent U shaped over the horse's back and his limbs left to hang down willy-nilly in the breeze on both sides. All around remained dark however, and only the dim sound of clopping hooves penetrate his addled brain. He determined to call to Piute Pete, but in his confused state the cry became an incoherent babble as it left his lips. He heard a series of coarse oaths, climaxed by a rap delivered smartly on his head, similar to the one he had experienced a short time before. The world once more faded blessedly from view and his consciousness retreated into restful slumber.

When he woke a second time, it was to the accompaniment of twittering birds of the night, and the sounds of other woodland beasties, of the creeping, crawling and slithering varieties. To a man of Jones' delicate sensibilities, the prospect of being marooned and helpless in the midst of the Texas wilds was a gloomy one indeed. With a disconsolate sigh, Jones opened his eyes. He had already grown accustomed to the Colt-less feel of his holsters.

Jones sat before a flickering fire, his legs drawn up awkwardly before him and bound tightly at the ankles. His wrists were similarly lashed in back of him. To his left sat Piute Pete, awake also, his scowl denoting discomfiture at being so bound. All around rose a wall of woodland. Jones became aware of a figure sitting on a rock on the opposite side of the fire, the figure's knees protruding into the lighted area so that the rifle barrel resting casually against one calf gleamed wickedly. The person was openly attending to his nails with an equally wicked bowie knife. Jones exchanged a glance with Piute Pete, but his companion's glance revealed no information other than the obvious fact that they were captives. "Heh-heh!" the shadowy figure chortled. It hawked loudly, and Jones dodged as expectorated tobacco sizzled in the flames of the brush fire. "So yere finally woken up, fancy dan?"

Jones recognized the voice as the person traveling under the name of One-eye leaned forward, his ruthless bearded face glowing like the devil's

own in the firelight, split now into a fiendish smirk of vicious glee. "Thought you were pretty smart, didn't you?" One-eye said contemptuously. "Figgering to queer the bank deal with Rivers. But we're too smart for yer, we are, Bagmon and Miz'r Lackdale." One-eye would have said more, but at that instant some wilderness fowl let out an unearthly screech in the underbrush and One-eye frantically seized his rifle, holding it at the ready as his eyes rotated wildly in their sockets. He scowled after a moment, when he saw the grin of humor which Jones could not suppress.

"Arrgh!" One-eye growled, leaping to his feet. "Don't look so smart or I'll clout yer in the side of the head." And then, with a trace of embarassment, he added, "I allus was e-scairt of animals. Snakes and lizards and things." One-eye resumed his seat. "Maybe one of 'em will come along and bite *you,* smarty," he said to Jones. Jones at the moment, thought feverish thoughts, suddenly seeing a ray of hope in the situation.

Though the night was starless, Jones had the feeling that it couldn't be more than midnight. He had been knocked unconscious on various other occasions, and he knew his capacities for coming out from under the effects of a blow. He realized that he, and he alone, knew the danger which was to befall Rio Bend on the evening of the Fourth of July. His escape was mandatory. Risking a question, he inquired, "How far are we from Rio Bend, my friend?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" replied One-eye in a tone of triumph.

Jones clamped his lips together, wriggling against the uncomfortable bonds. One-eye returned to his sanitary operations upon his person with the bowie knife. Some minutes passed. The night-wood symphony continued around them, and One-eye started violently on the average of once every thirty seconds.

"You going to kill us?" Piute Pete asked.

"Not if you're good boys," One-eye answered with heavy sarcasm. "Soon as Duke and the rest bust the Rio Bend bank tomorrow night, Miz'r Lackdale's lighting out of these parts. I can't see no harm in letting you fellers go," he said in a weak moment of good naturedness, but then he grew stern once more. "Course that's all up to the boss. You cain't do us any harm after we got the money. The boys'll decide when they get back tomorrow night," he concluded.

"Have you ever thought," Jones inquired with sly cunning, "that the boys might not *come* back? They might leave you here with us for a month, and you'd never see a sign of that bank money!"

"You can't fool me with that one!" One-eye exclaimed fiercely. "Now shet up. They'll be back, all right."

Jones decided to pursue that line of trickery no further. Piute Pete treated him to an entreating glance, to which Jones returned a nod of confidence. However, within himself, his confidence did not burn so high. His bonds, he had discovered, were too secure to be broken. He had to devise other methods if he was to save the Rio Bend bank, and more important, gives Lackdale and Bagmon the lesson they needed. *Those gentlemen,* he thought, *were foolish when they treated me to raps on the skull. They did not know the heights to which my anger can rise...*

AN HOUR passed. With a thrill of triumph, Jones suddenly noticed a large black beetle crawling laboriously up One-eye's trouser leg. That person had not yet seen the beetle. "Look out!" Jones cried without warning. One-eye stood up as if yanked. He threw his bowie knife helplessly into the air and waved his arms, crying out as if bitten. The beetle, thrown unceremoniously from One-eye's leg, was now crawling around in a circle

before the fire, its black armor shining wickedly with a reddish glow.

"What'd you do that for?" One-eye complained severely.

Jones inclined his head toward the beetle. One-eye saw it and his eyes opened wide in terror. "That," Jones said in rolling oratorical tones, "is the *beetalis blackarmoris poisonos*; known by its unscientific names as the Black Terror, or the Sure Death of the Plains." Jones shook his head sadly, catching a faint gleam of humor in Piute Pete's eye. One-eye scuttled around behind the rock and leaned over it, eyeing the fierce beetle. Jones had no idea as to the beast's true nature, but he was deliberately playing upon the outlaw's obvious weakness.

"It—it ain't—*pizen,* is it?" One-eye croaked fearfully.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is," Jones declared in mournful tones. He shook his head once more. "I'm sorry for you, my friend. Deeply sorry. That monster was crawling ruthlessly up your leg at the moment I cried out. You're done for. The mere touch of the Sure Death of the Plains is fatal."

One-eye stammered soundlessly for a moment. "It's a trick!" he declared with flagging severity.

"You fool!" Jones cried dramatically, his eyes blazing. "How do you think I could identify the creature with its true scientific Latin name, if I did not know the subject of which I speak? I am called *Doctor* Jones. The title refers to a degree of Doctor of Insectology, which I received from the venerable institution of Princeton University, in '48." Jones allowed a smug smile to cross his features. "Trick, eh? Well, you'll find out soon enough. Death comes in a matter of minutes. Say farewell to the world, for within half an hour, you'll have passed from this valley of sorrows."

"Amen!" declared Piute Pete with sudden enthusiasm.

One-eye hugged his leg, but not the leg on which the beetle had crawled. "It kind-a burns already," he admitted. His forehead shown with perspiration. "Doc, can—can you help me? Can you keep me from dyin'?"

Jones hesitated. "Well..." He glanced around the camp site, "I see certain roots, herbs and leaves that *might* work, but..." He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "I am your prisoner."

One-eye hesitated not one whit. He slashed Jones' bonds with his bowie knife, and while he carried his rifle to protect himself, that did not disturb Jones as it might have lesser men. It fitted his plan perfectly, for as he threw various useless bits of twig and leaf into the inverted crown of One-eye's hat, then poured in three inches of water from One-eye's canteen, he noticed that the guard's grip on his rifle became a little less firm. Jones congratulated himself on reducing the man's suspicion and making him believe Jones acted in good faith, through the simple method of not trying anything so foolish as an attack the moment his bonds were severed. The hat he set on the rock, while he raised his hands and sonorously intoned the last stanza of "The Raven", by Mr. Poe. This caused One-eye to rotate his eyeballs more fiercely than ever. "Hurry, hurry!" One-eye cried in a fit of consternation. "My leg's a-burnin' off already!"

Jones raised the hat and One-eye reached for it with one hand, to lift it to his lips in order that he might quaff the life-saving potion. Jones jammed the hat squarely into One-eye's face and disarmed the spluttering outlaw with one deft movement. One-eye continued to press the hat tightly to his face for a moment, and by the time he had realized trickery and regained himself, Jones had slashed Piute Pete loose with the bowie knife, and the two of them bound the helpless One-eye with his own thongs. One-eye's mournful complaint of being fatally poisoned chorused to the sky. A quick search of the surrounding territory by Jones revealed

that Lackdale and company had left One-eye without a horse. Jones, however, did find the Colts belonging to him and his pardner behind the rock. "Hurry!" Jones exclaimed to Piute Pete as he thrust his weapons in his place. "We'll have to go via foot power." To One-eye he said, "Which way is it to town? And how far?"

"Go to blazes!" One-eye cried vengefully.

The black beetle still crawled in its circle before the fire. Gingerly Jones picked it up, holding it before One-eye's face. "Talk!" he commanded tersely. He received the information without delay, and he and Piute Pete left One-eye a quivering wreck of a man, fretfully eyeing the beetle crawling in its circle not six inches from his elbow.

THEY SOON reached a road, and following One-eye's directions, they proceeded along it as rapidly as booted feet would allow. Dawn had grayed the east when they arrived at their destination, Rio Bend. Actually Jones realized they had tramped less than ten miles, but from the condition of his aching feet, he felt sure that it must have been at least a hundred. Piute Pete clumped along beside him, uttering complains now and again. Jones, however, put personal considerations from his mind as he and his companion hurried through the sleeping town. They proceeded directly to the house of Thomas Rivers and set up a terrific racket on the bell. The Mexican servant appeared, yawning, and Jones' excited words soon summoned Rivers himself, rubbing his eyes sleepily as he stepped into the courtyard, his long night shirt waving gently around his ankles.

"Quick, man!" Jones exclaimed. "No time to lose!" He related his story in a brief but dramatic style. Rivers' frown grew progressively more deep. When he had finished, Jones heard a startled gasp from the shadows of the arcade, and there he saw Consuelo Rivers, hand pressed to her cheek, gasping at the import of his words. Jones realized with satisfaction that any and all delusions about the character of Mr. Lance Lackdale had now been dissapated.

"Damn!" Rivers exploded. "This sounds like a trick to me!"

"What do you mean?" Jones cried in return.

"Well, last evening at around nine o'clock, a rancher from some twenty miles west rode into town, exclaiming that the 'Mexican' bandits were running off his cattle by droves, taking them into the cover of the Twisted Hills. Marshal Hasty took sixty of the town's best fighting men and rode out on the trail of the outlaws, determined to comb the Twisted Hills for the stolen cattle. He felt that we had made a mistake when we anticipated an attack on the bank."

"Aha!" cried Jones. "Clear now. And fiendish. Had anyone ever seen this rancher before?"

"No," Rivers replied, "but Amos Hasty isn't the kind of man to turn down a request for help. I told him it would be best not to make such a thorough search, and to return as soon as he could to Rio Bend to protect the bank. But he was so enthusiastic to get on the trail of these owlhoots, he wouldn't listen. If he gets deep into the Twisted Hills, he may be gone for days!"

"Meanwhile," Jones exclaimed softly, "the mysterious 'rancher' disappears, and while the good people of this town attend the fireworks display tomorrow, or I should say, this evening, Lackdale, Bagmon and the rest of the scurvy crew descend upon the bank and loot it, confident that Marshal Hasty and sixty of the town's best fighting men are chasing their tails in the Twisted Hills."

"We've got to stop them!" Piute Pete cried fiercely.

"We will stop them!" Jones replied.

"But how?" Rivers asked, startled. "I can think of perhaps ten good gun hands left in this town. Ten against

thirty or more..." He shook his head dismally. "We can never do it."

"Yes we can!" Jones returned. An idea had occured to him a moment before, an idea that not only satisfied his desire to see the renegades stopped, but added zest to the task, since the plan as he formulated it, included a more-than-ordinary reception for the forces of Lackdale, Bagmon and company. As the colors of summer dawn brilliantly dappled the summer sky, Rivers led Jones and Piute Pete into his house, while Jones talked rapidly and softly, explaining his scheme.

●

The Rio Bend Citizens lay shrouded in darkness. Within the vault, where Jones waited patiently, the darkness lay even thicker. The air seemed a trifle stuffy, but Jones could stand that. He lighted a match, keeping it carefully away from the wooden frame of the fireworks set toward the rear of the vault. His watch dial showed ten past nine. Down on the river, he reflected, the citizens of Rio Bend would be watching their display of Fourth of July color, and while Jones had commandeered almost half of the wagon load in the town's interest, the citizenry still had an ample supply of rockets to provide entertainment, and to convince Lackdale, Bagmon and Company all the while that the town lay supine and unsuspecting.

Jones knew the way the twelve men, including Rivers and Piute Pete, were deployed out in the bank proper. Hidden behind desks and counters, their guns ready. A clerk named Soames had been pressed into service, and he labored at a tall desk by the light of a solitary lamp. Soames knew the combination which would open the vault, a factor which suited Jones perfectly. Outwardly, the bank would look peaceful and deserted except for the man Soames, who, Jones had to admit, possessed such a meek countenance that the fierce minions of Duke Bagmon would find him no barrier.

SEVERAL minutes passed. With a start, Jones heard muffled voices beyond the thick wall of the vault door. He realized that naturally he had not been able to hear the arrival of the outlaws, undoubtedly through the alley door, whose hinges had been partly disconnected to afford the desperadoes an easier entrance. Jones extracted a match from his pocket and struck it on the seat of his pants as he heard the dial of the safe being operated. In a trice the door began to swing ponderously open. Jones had already applied the match to the fuse of the fireworks display and dodged back into a safe corner.

"Out of my way!" Jones heard a voice exclaim as the vault door opened fully. Duke Bagmon! Nothing could be more perfect. Duke stepped into the vault, uttering a confused oath as he saw the fuse flickering brightly in the darkness. Out in the bank, Jones caught the sound of Soames' plaintive piping. Duke hesitated just inside the vault door.

Jones cupped his hands around his mouth and cried out mournfully, *"Prepare to meet your doom, Duke Bagmon!"*

At that moment, a perfectly-timed Providence allowed the fireworks display to erupt into a shower of hellish red light. There, outlined in blazing crimson light, stood Mephistopheles himself, pitchfork raised, satanic leer on his spluttering face. The display threw a reddish light over Bagmon's features, but Jones nevertheless could see the man pale and begin to tremble fearfully. *"Yiiiii!"* exclaimed Bagmon, dropping both his Colts on the floor of the vault as he turned and fled through the door. Drips of fire began to fall from the devil's outline, already nearly burned out, as Jones drew his Colts and stepped into the bank. A babble of voices had arisen, strongest of all belonging to Duke Bagmon, who howled like an excited child. The gist of his outcry was that he wished to reach the exit as rapidly as possible.

But the exit was now securely guard-

ed, front and back. Other matches hissed, and a series of half a dozen pinwheels began to spin, illuminating the bank lobby as they rotated, throwing off yellow, red, white, blue, green and orange flame. One or two of the thirty-odd renegades fired off their pistols, but purely by accident, since they milled like a frightened herd of cattle. Suddenly, Lance Lackdale, the only member of the group not clad in serape and sombrero, broke through the press and dashed through the vault, his gun drawn. Jones could see that he was not to be dismayed by the impossible tangle of frightened men, but that he clearly intended to loot the vault.

Jones stepped forward. "Hands up!" he cried. Lackdale, an unpleasant snarl on his dissapated features, snapped a hasty shot at Jones, who ducked, hearing the projectile pink the edge of the vault door scant inches away from his head. Like avenging angels, the honest men of the town rose up from behind the desks and counters, guns drawn, eyes glinting with steely determined lights as the pinwheels spluttered and added a colorful note to the scene.

"Trapped, d a m n it!" Lackdale cried, darting to the left, then to the right in the manner of an animal surrounded by hunters.

"Surrounded!" Jones shouted in a commanding tone. "Throw down your guns or you're lost!" Several of the desperadoes, spurred on by Lackdale's efforts, began firing. Rapidly their shots were returned by the townsmen, who were well protected. Jones took careful aim, fired, and saw a desperado drop his gun and clutch at his shoulder.

At that moment, President Ulysses S. Grant lit up at the front door in a blaze of blue-fire glory. The display threw a ghostly light over the whole throng, and the spectacle completely demoralized the outlaw company. Colts, dirks, clubs and the other paraphenalia of banditry began to rain onto the floor, the noise creating a hailstorm of clumps. Lance Lackdale had collapsed into the waiting arms of two of the townsmen. However, Jones caught a flicker of motion as Duke Bagmon dashed wildly for the rear exit.

Spurred on by ruthless determination to teach the man a lesson once and for all, Jones raced in hot pursuit, seizing the outlaw in the vicinity of the orange pinwheel. Exercising his full strength, Jones whirled Duke Bagmon around, while his right foot deftly overturned the pinwheel so that it spun close to the floor in a horizontal position. With a quick blow Jones sent Duke Bagmon reeling. Jones caught the man's shoulder, being certain that the brigand sat down directly in the center of the revolving pinwheel. Duke Bagmon leaped up again as if driven by invisible forces. His hands clamped themselves on his posterior and he howled in awful pain, as if all the fiends of the underworld tortured him.

Jones glanced around the bank. The outlaws stood together listlessly, their serapes drooping. And Jones remarked to Piute Pete, who was standing near, that they had done a rather good job. The last few moments of President Ulysses S. Grant's benign firework-blue smile added force to the words.

ON THE FOLLOWING day, Capitan Manuel Perada presented Jones and Piute Pete with an engraved scroll in the offices of the *Rio Bend Eagle*. Consuelo looked on admiringly, as did Tom Rivers and a chagrined Amos Hasty who had only just returned from a fruitless search of the Twisted Hills.

"You gentlemen, in the true spirit of patriotism, have removed a blot from the record of my government, and proved yourself worthy as promoters of international understanding," Perada announced with a generous display of teeth.

Jones received the scroll with a gallant bow. Piute Pete, however, could not restrain himself. He nudged his companion and asked, "How much is it worth, cash, Doc?"

Jones treated Piute Pete with a

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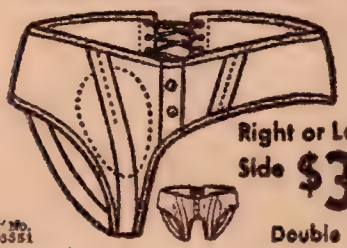

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sharp glance as the small company raised a polite round of applause.

"I can't tell you how foolish I feel," Consuelo Rivers said breathlessly, stepping forward. "You were right about Lance all along."

"Mr. Lackdale and his companions will never again bother any of you," Jones replied with dignity, "reposing as they will soon be in the state penal institution. My little visit in Rio Bend has been quite pleasant, and profitable." Jones added the last two words as a concession to the formality of the occasion, although he did not feel the words truly within him.

"Speaking of profit," Rivers said, extending a check in the amount of one hundred dollars, "the president of the bank, Oscar Wells, wanted me to give you this as a reward for helping out."

"Wells!" Jones replied in a faultless imitation of astonishment. Secretly, he had felt all along that he and Piute Pete *had* deserved a reward. Still, however, he had derived a certain intangible satisfaction from watching Mr. Duke Bagmon recline with a rotating pinwheel under the seat of his trousers... Dislodging the foolish thought from his mind, he placed the draught in his pocket, and he and Piute Pete made their farewells.

A few moments later they rode out of town. A thought occurred to Jones, and he turned to his companion. "Pete, where did you get that horse? You rode the wagon all the way from Las Cruces. You had no horse when we arrived in Rio Bend."

"Why," Pete declared, his face bearing the expression of true innocence, "I just picked it up as we went by the *Poison Bottle*. At the hitch rack." He patted the horse's neck affectionately. "Pretty, uh?"

But Dr. Rakehell Jones was already spurring rapidly ahead down the road, fearing that there was no time to lose.

★

Jeff Milton

SPECIAL FEATURE

By LAURAN PAINE

WHO WAS Jeff Milton? Well, he wasn't a Pat Garrett, or a Clay Allison, or a Buffalo Bill; but Jeff was one of that great array of real Westerners who didn't create reputations, or play to the crowds, or write long winded and half-false accounts of the West; he *lived* it.

Jeff Milton was one of that vast forgotten brotherhood of Westerners who went quietly, calmly, and confidently, without fanfare or bragadoccio.

In short, Milton was a man, not a trumped-up symbol, of the early West.

Jeff Milton was born on his father's plantation near Marianna, Florida, November 7, 1861; he was a direct descendant of John Milton, the great English poet. His people emigrated to Virginia in 1730; at the outbreak of the Civil War, Jeff's father was appointed Governor of the State of Florida, under the Confederacy. Jeff, incidentally, was named after Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, a close friend of the elder Milton.

With the crushing defeat of the Confederacy, the Milton plantation—which consisted of over seven-thousand acres and employed close to sixty slaves—was wiped out and the family came onto evil days. Jeff's father died as much of a broken heart as anything else when Jeff was four years old.

When Jeff matured, he stood a trifle over six feet in height and

weighed a little over two-hundred pounds. His features were those of a gentleman and an aristocrat, his brown eyes had a hooded, piercing quality that many a Western outlaw had sound reason to fear.

Tossed like a leaf on the turbulent tide of the reconstruction period after the war, Jeff eventually went to Texas to live with his sister, who was married to a Confederate veteran named Colonel Yarborough. While with his sister's family, Jeff lied about his age and joined the Texas Rangers. Because of his size, his age was accepted as stated and he was assigned to Company E, Texas Rangers, under Captain Nevill.

One of Jeff's assignments was to go to a small town in Mitchell County, Texas, and help create law and order out of the reign of terror that had been forced upon the community by the local cowboys and two-bit badmen. One man in particular, Patterson, was overbearing and careless with his guns when he was in town. This Patterson was vastly admired by the other roughs, and took tremendous delight in building up his reputation as a desperado.

Jeff and two other Rangers rode quietly into town, and got embroiled in an argument with some hardcases almost immediately because they refused to give over the right of way on the plank sidewalk; when the smoke had cleared, Jeff's gun was still smoking and the renegade who had "chose" him was stretched his length in the dusty roadway. It was Patterson; a neat punctuation-mark, about the size of a dime, showed a little bloody froth directly over his heart. Witnesses after declared that Patterson had shot first, but that Milton's aim was quite obviously the better of the two

Mitchell County was populated with an ignorant class of transient gunmen who, while normally content to punch cows after the custom of the range, nevertheless had found release from routine in following Patterson's example in frightening law-abiding citizens. Many of these hardcases saw the handwriting on the wall, saddled up, and lit out when Patterson came to his abrupt end; but others screamed murder and demanded that the Rangers be arrested and brought to trial. Since the cowmen were supreme, the three Rangers were speedily locked up.

Trial under the circumstances, was synonymous with suicide. For the Rangers to show themselves, unarmed, in the courtroom packed with enraged cattlemen and their half drunk cohorts, would have invited murder; the word was out that, justice or no justice, the three Rangers would not leave the courtroom alive.

A sympathetic jailer enlightened the doomed men of the spectators' intentions, and the Rangers put their heads together. Jeff thought of a novel plan. Naturally the prisoners could not wear their sidearms in the courtroom, but there was nothing stopping them from getting two friends to wear the guns for them, stand between them, keep their hands crossed on their chests and thus make their armament easily accessible.

When court convened, the room was packed and a stout odor of sour horse-sweat and cheap whiskey rode thickly on the air. The cowmen were out in force. The place was jammed and a pleasant face in that seething mob would have been about as appropriate as a herd of turtles.

Jeff and his three fellow Rangers were marched into the room and the audience tensed. Standing between the prisoners were two grim-faced jailers, arms folded high on their chests, while the fingers of the prisoners were dangling over the exposed butts of their own six-guns. The trial went off with nary a hitch or suspicious movement as the defendants stared closely at the assemblage; and, to cap it off, they were aquitted.

EVERY INCH an officer of the law, both in appearance and conviction, Jeff Milton had his beliefs put

to the test one time, in a way that hardly any other law officer can duplicate. While serving under Sheriff Charley Russell of Socorro County, New Mexico, Jeff was handed a letter and a warrant for the arrest of an outlaw, one day, that very nearly changed his way of life.

Jeff looked casually at the warrant, looked closer, read a little, then put the paper slowly on the sheriff's desk.

"Well, Sheriff, I reckon you hadn't heard that I'd resigned this morning, did you?"

The sheriff looked up, a puzzled frown on his leathery face. "Now just what in hell are you talkin' about, Jeff?"

Milton shrugged. "Well, anyway, here's my badge; I won't need it anymore."

The sheriff looked in amazement as Jeff unpinned his badge and put it on the desk. His face went from the badge to the warrant. A light flickered in his eyes as the key to the situation dawned on him. Sheriff Russell was no pedant either, having seen enough of life to realize that circumstances can create a fugitive overnight; but all fugitives are not necessarily outlaws. He grinned self-consciously; Jeff Milton had refused to track down the man described in the warrant because he was an old friend.

"Say, Jeff, uh, ain't it about time for your vacation?" Jeff looked in wonder but the sheriff didn't give him a chance to answer. "Why don't you take along an extra horse and just ride down through White Sands country; maybe you'll see your old friend down there." He was being elaborately casual. "Man can't never tell what a little talkin' will do until he tries some, now, can he?"

Milton took the vacation, the extra horse, and did a little talkin'. The results were better than he expected; his friend not only went straight, but was pardoned for his first offense when he voluntarily surrendered.

Jeff went hunting with an old friend by the name of Dick Steele one time, in the wild mountainous country of Northern New Mexico. The two men found a big grizzly and Jeff threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired in one fluid, graceful movement. The bear went down like a pole-axed steer and Jeff leaned his rifle against a tree and reached for his knife, preparatory to slitting the "dead" bear's throat. About this time the bear, temporarily stunned by the bullet, came out of his stupor with an insane roar of murderous fury, made a wild, looping swipe at Milton with one great arm, talons extended, which nearly disemboweled Jeff.

Jeff clutched at his exposed intestines and ran for a nearby tree. The bear was after him in an instant and Jeff knew that he'd never make the tree nor be able to climb it after he got there. He whirled, palmed his six-shooter with his disengaged hand and fired. This time the bear went down and stayed down; he was shot through the brain.

Dick Steele was as pale as a ghost. Jeff told him he didn't look well. Dick swallowed a couple of times and managed a weak, ill sounding: "Hell, Jeff, you ought to have a look at yourself; my Gawd, your insides is all out."

Jeff Milton survived that episode in a colorful life, but the scars went with him to his final reward.

An incident that occurred soon after Jeff Milton had signed over with the Texas Rangers is a good indication of the man's ability to handle a gun. Jeff was on a train that was broken down; the passengers were walking up and down the tracks out of boredom, while they waited for the necessary repairs to be made. On board at the same time, but unknown to Jeff, was Captain John Hughes of the Rangers.

There was an attractive young lady among the passengers who fancied some mistletoe in the top of an old cottonwood. None of the 1880 version of the modern wolves, who had clustered around her from the time she got on until the breakdown, were gal-

lant enough to climb after the greenery. Apparently the meaning of mistletoe escaped them; at any rate, the young lady turned to Jeff and asked him if he could get the plant. Jeff said he wouldn't climb the tree but if he'd had his sixgun with him he'd shoot it down for her. A stranger was standing close by and smiled slightly as he pulled a .45 from under his coat. He thought he was calling a braggart's bluff when he stepped up and offered his gun to Jeff, butt first. Jeff took the gun, aimed it and fired and the clump of mistletoe fell close enough to the young lady's feet to satisfy her. Jeff then calmly turned and handed back the gun, butt-first, and thanked the stranger. The man holstered his gun with speculative eyes.

"I'm Captain John Hughes of the Texas Rangers. My outfit needs men like you. Let's go some place where we can talk."

Jeff smiled slowly. "Well sir, my name's Milton and I've already joined," he said.

IN 1894, WHEN Jeff was thirty-two years old, he was appointed Chief of Police of El Paso for the express purpose of cleaning up a town that housed—among other infamous people—John Wesley Hardin, the diminutive and deadly outlaw who had, at that time, a string of thirty-six victims to the credit of his murderous temper and lightning-like ability with .45s.

Jeff had a proclamation printed and distributed; it stated that every gambling hell and sporting-house was to close by midnight and stay closed. The evening wore on peaceably enough; when midnight came, the houses went right on operating, apparently thinking that Jeff's ultimatum would be impossible for one man to enforce. Buckling on his gun, Jeff strode alone into the biggest and most prosperous gambling-dive in the city, stopped the games and faced the gamblers and their boss.

"You'll close down, or you'll be in jail, or I'll be dead; what's it going to be?"

The sight of the big lawman standing against the bar, coat open and gun exposed, was enough. The gambling-house closed; very soon after the other questionable houses in El Paso followed suit, one by one.

When the city administration changed at the next election, Jeff resigned and became Deputy U. S. Marshal under Marshal Dick Ware, an ex-Sergeant in Jeff's old company of the Texas Rangers. There was one particular outlaw who had made Marshal Ware's existence miserable, evading every trap set for him by slipping across the line into Mexico. This man, named McRose, agreed to meet Deputy Marshal George Scarborough on the Mexican Central Railroad bridge over the Rio Grande River, for the purpose of proving that one of the things he was accused of doing had not been done by him at all.

Deputy Marshal Scarborough, distrusting his man, staked Jeff Milton, and another Deputy Marshal by the name of McMahan, on the American end of the bridge. Marshal Scarborough's suspicions were confirmed when, in the course of the meeting, McRose whipped out his gun and fired at Scarborough. The bullet went wild even at that close range; Jeff Milton, down at the far end of the bridge raised up, aimed and fired. McRose fell dead with Jeff's .45 slug squarely through his heart.

THE DEFUNCT McRose had an interesting blonde wife, whom John Wesley Hardin had been cultivating for some time; now, with McRose out of the way, Hardin moved in solid. He made one mistake, however, for he voiced it around that he had paid off the Deputy U. S. Marshal for killing McRose.

Hardin's statement eventually got back to Jeff, who promptly looked up the notorious killer, found him in a

[*Turn To Page* 107]

THE BOSS' BOY

by Roe Richmond

He was known as the boss' son — and the small amount of begrudging respect he was accorded was solely for that reason. But there is a time in every man's life when he has to either stand by himself or go on forever as the boss' boy.

WITH AN unpleasant, down-curved smile on his tough scarred face, Montauk said, "I can't be fightin' the boss' son."

"You can forget that," said young Slim Pennell. "You'll have to fight, if you don't keep your tongue off me."

"You'll have to grow up some first," Montauk told him carelessly. "I don't pick on kids."

"Maybe a slap in the face'd change your mind."

"Don't do it, sonny," warned Montauk. "There's things a man can't take, even from the boss' boy."

"To hell with that stuff!" Slim Pen-

nell said. "I'm not bankin' on that any."

Old Tom Selway, the foreman, came out of the bunkhouse and took in the situation with a slit-eyed glance. The men had gathered in the shade to smoke after-breakfast cigarets before saddling up. Montauk and Pennell faced one another at the center of a lounging semi-circle. The boy stood maybe an inch taller than Montauk's six feet, but he looked lanky and gangling, immature and undeveloped against the solid muscular bulk of the tophand.

"You two at it again?" Selway drawled in mild disgust. "Cut it out now, boys. Slim, you slope along. You don't want me catchin' hell from Big Bill, do you?"

Slim Pennell grinned at the veteran ramrod. "This Monty sure rubs me the wrong way, Tom." The boy was tow-headed, blue-eyed, his smooth pleasant face tanned golden-brown. He was dressed like the other working hands, blue jeans, faded shirt and scarf, booted and spurred, a gun-belt strapped on his thin hips, an old hat cocked on his blond head.

"Forget it, Slim," advised Tom Selway. "We all got work to do."

"All right, Tom," said the boy, and looked at Montauk. "Some other time, Monty."

Montauk's down-turned mouth was contemptuous. "Anytime when you get growed up, sonny." Montauk wheeled away, a big powerful man with a dash of color in his range clothes, his face ugly with its broken beak of a nose and brutal jaws. But his eyes were strangely beautiful, clear and amber colored, and the curls under his hat gleamed a rich auburn. Montauk had a great attraction for women, it was said, and treated them as ruthlessly as he did men.

Trailing after Montauk was his constant companion, Chill Cirillo, dark and sleek with long sideburns and a neat mustache, suave, smooth and graceful, a gunman of established reputation like Montauk. In the Washita country it was still essential to employ gun-fighters as well as cowhands. Once, Big Bill Pennell and Tom Selway had handled that department personally. Now that age had slowed them somewhat, they had hired Montauk and Cirillo in that capacity. Other Triangle-P riders were also handy with guns—Osswall, Linn, Rexford, Doying—but Monty and Chill were the specialists.

THERE WAS a sudden stir and change of attitude in the men along the bunkhouse wall. Slim Pennell turned and saw his father, Big Bill as he was known throughout the Territory, striding toward them, a graying giant of a man with a somber craggy face and ice-blue eyes. Bill Pennell no longer wore a gun, no longer needed one. His air of command and assurance was enough; the power of his personality, the known quality of his fearlessness and strength.

"Son, you're huntin' trouble again," he said quietly. "You won't be drivin' that herd to Abilene."

"But you said this was my drive, Dad," protested Slim. "You—"

"When you act like a man, Slim, I'll give you a man's responsibility. Until then I won't take that risk. Go on up to the house and wait for me, boy." Bill's voice was gentle, but nonetheless firm and authoritative. He gestured with a huge hand, and Slim started walking toward the ranchhouse, his head bowed in shame, humiliation and bitter disappointment. This was to have been his first trail drive to the railhead at Abilene, a turning point in his life, a coming of age. Now, because Montauk had taunted him, Slim had flared up and flung away the opportunity.

I'll kill that Montauk one of these days, Slim Pennell thought. *He's made my life miserable ever since he came here, him and that sly oily Cirillo. They're no good, either of them, and sometime Dad'll find out how rotten they are. Most likely when it's too*

late! I wouldn't trust them as far as I could throw a Brahma bull.

Big Bill Pennell had turned to his riders, faded blue eyes flickering cold fire at Montauk and Cirillo. "Monty, I've told you not to bait that boy. I won't tell you again. You and Chill pick your crew and make the drive The herd's gathered, the remuda and chuck wagon's ready. Watch it through the Nations, there's a lot of bad ones hidin' out in the Indian country. We don't want any more losses, either men or cattle. You should be in Abilene Saturday, back here by Tuesday night. Get started right away."

When Big Bill looked at Tom Selway, his eyes warmed and softened a little. They discussed the day's work for the hands who would be left behind under the foreman's supervision. Selway, small and wizened, bowlegged and leather-tough, squinted at Bill as he bit off a chew of tobacco. "Don't be too hard on the kid, Bill. That Monty prods him considerable."

"I know, and it's got to stop," Bill said. "But I warned Slim he'd have to control himself better. He's too hair-triggered for this country, Tom."

Selway's seamed brown face crinkled with a grin. "You wasn't so slow yourself, Bill, as I recollect. Seems like you used to catch fire kinda fast."

"Hell, that was different. I could back it up, Tom. But Slim's just a kid. He ain't ready to go against men like Montauk."

"Maybe not, Bill. But I wouldn't sell the boy too short."

"Neither would I Tom," said big Bill. "But I want him full grown before he starts collectin' bullet holes."

Back in the ranch-house, Bill found his son cramming supplies into a pair of saddlebags, his boyish face set in a smooth hard mask. "Where you goin', son?"

Slim Pennell shrugged his wide rangy shoulders. "I'm no good around here. Reckon I'll take a ride somewhere."

"You're always goin' off half-cocked, Slim," said Big Bill. "You've got the makin's of quite a man if it wasn't for that."

"I can't stand Montauk," Slim said flatly. "I never could. He gives me the same feelin' a rattler does. And Cirillo's even slimier."

"They've been good men on the job here."

"Maybe," the boy said, stuffing an extra six-gun and shell-belt into one of the bags.

"Don't go gettin' drunk and raisin' hell in town, Slim," said Big Bill Pennell. "Somebody'll forget you're my boy and shoot you."

"I guess you think that's all that keeps me alive—bein' your son?"

"It helps a good deal," his father said mildly.

Slim looked at him defiantly. "Maybe I ought to go some place where they don't know who I am. Maybe that's the only way to prove anythin'—"

"What have you got to prove? Is that why you're always rilin' up, boy?"

"I'm nineteen," Slim said. "In this country you should be a man at that age—if you're ever goin' to be one. But me, I'm just Big Bill Pennell's boy."

"And you don't like that?"

"No," Slim said. "I don't. I'm proud enough of you and all that, Dad. But I've got a life of my own to live, and I want to be my own man."

"All right, son," Bill said quietly. "You go and do what you figure you've got to... But be careful, don't take fool chances, and remember you got a home to come back to."

Slim smiled then, bright and boyish. "Sure, Dad, I'll take care. And I'll be comin' home in a few days."

"Triangle-P'll be yours one of these days," Bill said thoughtfully. "It's a pretty good spread, son."

"The best in the whole Washita," said Slim Pennell. "That's why, Dad —I want to be big enough to cut it when the time comes."

2

IN SHOULDICE the next day, fresh from a bath, shave and haircut in the barbershop, dressed in a new gray-and-blue plaid shirt, blue scarf and trousers, his best boots and flat-crowned gray hat, Slim Pennell rode out to call on Helen Miller. The large redstone house stood on a shelf above the willow-screened Washita River, a veritable castle in this prairie-and-mountain country. Old Anson Millar, president of the bank, owner of several stores, saloons, and the hotel, was as big a man in town as Bill Pennell was on the range. Old Anson had always encouraged the friendship between his daughter and young Pennell, possibly because of his respect for Big Bill's bank account. But Helen, only eighteen herself, persisted in treating Slim like an overgrown boy, and obviously preferred the attention of older men.

Helen was lying in a hammock under a great live oak, cool and lovely in a white dress that accentuated her vivid dark beauty, her skirts carelesly hitched up to display a disquieting length of shapely legs. She was mature, fully rounded for her age, and Slim Pennell felt awkward and shy as he dismounted before her in the shade. Helen's eyes glowed darkly in her finely chiseled face, and her red mouth curved in a smile, showing even white teeth.

"Why hello, Slim," she greeted gaily. "All dressed up like a dude, aren't you? And what is the occasion?"

"Nothin'," he mumbled, ill at ease. "Just in town, thought I'd drift around..."

"In last night, Slim? Then I'll bet you got drunk in the *Imperial*, picked a fight, danced with all the girls in the *Lodestone*, and raised the very devil." Helen Millar laughed. "Poor boy, you try so hard to show everybody what a tough man you are!"

Slim's cheeks were burning under the tan, and his blue eyes flashed angrily, but the words wouldn't come as he wanted them to. Choking and kicking the turf, he gave up, and the girl relented a little.

"I thought you were trail-bossing the next Triangle-P drive, Slim. What happened?"

"Changed my mind," he said.

Helen laughed again, unable to resist tormenting him. "You mean Big Bill changerd *his* mind. Who's driving the herd, Slim—Montauk?"

"That's right." Slim Pennell scowled and looked at his big hands. "Look, Helen—I thought maybe you'd go to the dance with me Saturday night."

"Why, Slim!" she exclaimed in surprise. "That's nice of you to ask me, I thought those dances were too tame for you... I'm sorry, but I have a date."

"Who with?" he demanded.

"Is that any of your business?"

"It might be."

"All right," she said pertly. "It's with Monty Montauk."

"Montauk?" he said, with mingled horror and disgust. "How can you—" Slim broke off as another thought occurred to him. "He won't be here anyway. He'll be in Abilene Saturday night."

Helen lifted her shoulders. "Well, we have a date anyway. Some other time perhaps, Slim."

"Never mind," he said roughly. "I don't care to compete with a man like Montauk. Not even for you, Helen."

Her laugh rippled out, amused and lightly mocking. "Well, I doubt if you could offer much competition, Slim. Monty is a man of wide experience."

"So I've heard," Slim Pennell said. "I'll be ridin' along."

"Don't hurry off, Slim," the girl said, swinging from the hammock to the ground with a flash of long legs,

standing disturbingly close, her fragrance filling his head, her nearness making him quiver with desire. "I'll get you a drink, or something to eat."

"No, thanks." Slim turned and walked to his big bay gelding, stepping at once into the saddle.

"Oh, you always get mad at me, Slim," Helen said wearily.

He grinned without humor. "I wonder why? So long, Helen."

"If you're sure Monty won't be back, why don't you come around Saturday night?"

"In his place?" Slim laughed harshly. "Not me, Helen, not ever."

"What have you got against Monty? Just because he jokes with you—"

"He's no good," Slim said. "A girl like you shouldn't even speak to him. Goodbye, Helen." He wheeled the big bay and started for town.

"Don't do anything rash or foolish now, Slim!" she called after him, with real anxiety in her tone.

His only answer was a reckless laugh, flung back across his shoulder. Helen Millar stood watching his high slender figure, slouched easily in the saddle, until he was out of sight. There was a grave troubled look in her dark eyes. Slim never had acted or talked like that before. The wildness in him was flaring dangerously close to the surface. In spite of his awkward shyness, he seemed more like a man to be reckoned with than a boy to be laughed at. She realized that she was interested, intrigued, and excited. She wondered if he would ever get around to taking her in those long arms and kissing her...

RIDING BACK into Shouldice, Slim Pennell was thinking grimly: *Sometime I'll just grab her, without saying a word, hold her so tight she can't breathe, and crush those ripe lips against her white teeth...* Some of the old-timers claimed that was the only proper way to handle a woman, especially if you weren't much of a talker.

Then his thoughts turned to Montauk. It was odd that Monty should have made a date for Saturday night. Even if Slim had taken charge of the drive, Monty was to go along... Could it be that he never expected to get that herd through the Cherokee Strip and across the Arkansas to Abilene? For quite a while now, Slim had been looking for Montauk and Cirillo to pull something. They weren't men who were contented to work for wages from another man. Two thousand cattle at twenty-five dollars a head meant fifty-thousand in cash.

Slim Pennell cantered into the main drag of the town, pulling up and racking his horse in front of the *Imperial Saloon.* Leaning in the shade of the nearest awning he shaped and lighted a cigaret. He was tempted to cut over the Kiowa Hills and intercept the drive, trail along out of sight and see if anything happened... Then he thought: *To hell with it. Dad trusted them where he wouldn't me, so let it ride. That's the way Dad wanted it, so I'm not going to horn in... The thing for a no-account kid to do in town is just naturally get himself liquored-up a little.*

Turning to the swing-doors of the *Imperial,* Slim had a pang of misgiving as he remembered the good riders on that drive who might suffer and die if Montauk and Cirillo had a doublecross planned. There were men he liked

pushing those steers—Rexford, Doying, Satterlee, Bonett, Roslyn, Kendy, and others. Good loyal Triangle hands, who had helped teach him to ride, rope, shoot, brand and work cattle. Well, they could take care of themselves, they'd be all right. Slim went on to the bar.

"Well, if it ain't Big Bill's boy again," said the bartender jovially. "What you drinkin' this mornin', son?"

The half-smile froze on Slim Pennell's face, and his blue eyes blazed cold from narrowed lids. "Not a damn thing," he said quickly, wheeling and walking from the barroom, the barkeeper and customers gazing after him in perplexity.

That had done it. Slim's mind was made up definitely this time. He was going to hit the shortcut trail across the Kiowas and overtake the Triangle beef before it got into the Nations and the Strip.

This was Tuesday, the herd's second day on the drive. They would make close to twenty miles a day, for Big Bill had given them six days to hit Abilene and it was over a hundred miles. By tonight, Slim estimated, they should be somewhere near the Cimarron River. With hard riding and good luck, he'd come up on them there.

●

It was rough going over the mountains, but Slim Pennell knew the country, the best passes and cuts, and his mount was strong and sure-footed. The landscape varied widely from dense woodlands to bare bleak rock. The trails climbed and dropped steeply, twisted tortuously under the glaring sun. The bay gelding was lathered, and Slim rode sweat-soaked in the scorching leather. They toiled up narrow rock-walled passages, the sun refracted blindingly from stone surfaces, and escaped into the sanctuary of clean-smelling pine-shaded slopes. They labored along the timberline where only scrub cedars and aspens survived, and in places they plodded above it on naked sun-blasted heights of wind-eroded rock, a fantastic inferno under the molten sky. Slim made good time without punishing the horse or himself too much, something he had learned from his father, old Tom Selway, and other veteran riders.

Slim knew he was a disappointment to Big Bill, the knowledge was always with him, bitter, hurting and nagging. Dad didn't think too highly of his only son. At nineteen, Big Bill Pennell had ramrodded thousand-mile cattle drives up from Texas, killed a half-dozen men in gun battles, made love to a score of women, and was know from Laredo to St. Louis. A magnificent golden giant of a man, loved and respected, hated and feared, overwhelming and indomitable. It was natural for such a man to expect too much from his son. To Big Bill, Slim seemed far more callow, childish and insignficant than he actually was. Big Bill, although he would have denied it, already had tagged Slim a washout and failure. It burned like acid within the boy as he crossed the Kiowas.

Slim had crossed the divide and was descending the southwesterly stretches, when he saw a body of horsemen below him. Reining into a sheltering crevice, he swung down to hold the horse's nostrils and watch the riders file past on the ridge beneath his position. They were strangers, a motley hard-looking outfit, including a few Indians, Mexicans and halfbreeds, all heavily armed. Something about the white men reminded Slim of Montauk and Cirillo, although he couldn't have explained just what it was.

They were traveling in his general direction, south and west, and Slim decided to trail them at a safe distance. They had the tough, reckless, fugitive look of men who lived outside the law, whose lives depended on the quickness of their eyes, hands and guns. They might very well have designs on that herd of prime Triangle beef. The afternoon waned as Slim followed them over the broken upland wilderness.

HE WAS traversing a shallow rocky basin, open except for scattered clusters of boulders, halfway across it, when lead snarled in the air as rifle-shots rang out from the wooded shoulder ahead. Slim Pennell flung down, himself and the gelding behind the nearest rocks, a cavalry maneuver taught him by Rexford, who had done a stretch in the army. The shelter was scanty, adequate for protection unless they flanked him, but offering little chance of fighting back. Crossfire lashed at the boulders, pinning him down securely. Slim had hauled his Spencer carbine from its boot, but there wasn't much opportunity to use it. The hidden marksmen had him bracketed, their shots hammering steadily at his cover, ripping up clouds of stonedust and showers of chips as they screamed off the rocks.

The unseen enemy had started flanking movements, Slim could tell from the widening angles of their fire, and in a few minutes they would have him uncovered and at their mercy. Nothing to do but burrow into the barrier, use the horse for a shield, and make them pay as much as possible for his life. Slim's dry lips twisted in a rueful grin as he crouched here under the hailing bullets. *This is a hell of a way to show Dad what a full-grown fighting man I am. Riding into a trap, getting myself killed before I even glimpsed an opponent...* It looked as if Big Bill was right, after all. Slim just wasn't big enough to cut it in this country.

As the snipers circled warily abreast of him on the rims of the bowl, Slim Pennell slammed shots at them from his Spencer .50, but enemy bullets were screeching closer all the time. Splinters stung Slim's face and hands, dirt sprayed over him, and searing lead tugged at loose folds of his clothing. Slim was sullenly resigned to his fate, when another rifle started whanging steadily from somewhere to his rear.

On the north rim a Mexican reared up, screaming curses, and pitched headlong down the ledge into a tangle of brush. To the south an Indian lurched howling into the open, toppling spread-eagled from the rimrock into the stony basin. Firing from the circumference ceased, and the scrubby timber was agitated by the flight of the remaining riflemen. Slim Pennell came up in a crouch, triggering and levering until his carbine was empty. The enemy fled without returning another shot, and stillness surged back into the bowl as the racketing echoes faded. Slim turned and raised his hand to the man who came riding in on a rawboned dun, broad stocky man with a square sun-blackened face and gray eyes that were startling in their lightness, slits of white fire under his hatbrim.

"I'm sure obliged," Slim said, smiling. "My number was about up."

"I like to even the odds when I can. You know your playmates?"

Slim shook his tow-head. "Saw 'em a while back. Rough-lookin' bunch."

"Rougher'n they look," the man said, glancing at the two bodies on opposite sides of the depression. "Them two won't be doin' any talkin'. You interested in that herd down below, son?"

"My father's," Slim said simply. His bay gelding was scrambling up and shaking himself now. The stranger's pale eyes flicked to the Triangle-P brand.

"You're Big Bill Pennell's boy?"

"That's right," Slim said, his expression faintly distasteful at that familiar identification.

The other man smiled as he noticed this, his bleak strong-boned features becoming suddenly pleasant. "You're maybe tired of hearin' that, son," he said with gentle understanding. "But it's a thing to be proud of, just the same. They don't make many like Big Bill. My names's Dan Colladay." He opened his leather vest to reveal the gold badge of a U. S. Marshal, and Slim remembered the name then.

"I've heard Dad speak of you," he said, grasping the square powerful hand extended by Colladay. "They call me Slim."

"Mount up, Slim," said the marshal. "We'll have a look at these two jaspers

and dust along. I reckon we're headin' the same way, That bunch in front of us is interested in your dad's herd, too. And I'm sure interested in some of them."

The Mexican and the Indian were both quite dead. There was nothing to identify them, but Colladay apparently knew them. "There's two slugs that wasn't wasted, Slim," he drawled, nodding with satisfaction. "Reckon I'd get a bounty if I wanted to bring in their heads. But I'm after some bigger game than that."

Sunset bannered the western horizon in flaming glory as they rode on, fiery red and gold and royal purple thinning out into soft pink, pale lemon, and delicate lavender. Twilight was deepening to dusk when they dropped to the bottomlands and saw the dustcloud of the drive ahead in the evening. They would bed down on this bank of the Cimarron, as Slim had figured, and make the crossing in the morning. The outlaws apparently were staying in the hills until the time to strike came. It could very well come at the river crossing in the early daylight.

Slim Pennell and Dan Colladay had become well-acquainted in a short time on the trail. Slim told about his suspicions of Montauk and Cirillo, and possibly of Osswall and Linn, who seemed inclined in that direction. The others were all loyal to Big Bill, he felt certain. Colladay disclosed that he was after some of the leaders of that band they had encountered this afternoon. Any Triangle riders who were hooked-up with them, would undoubtedly have previous records of their own.

"We could make quite a haul here—if we had enough men," Colladay said. "But the way things are, I'm afraid some good men'll get hurt, Slim."

They made a cold camp in a sheltered nook of the foothills, the Triangle-P herd darkening the moonlit valley below, and Slim scouted the bedgrounds in hope of getting some word of warning to Rexford, Doying, Bonett, Kendy, or any of the hands he trusted. But the only night riders he saw were Linn and Osswall, and he dared not reveal anything to those two.

Slim and Dan Colladay stood watch in turn throughout the night, fearful that the outlaws might swoop down to stampede the cattle, but there was no sign of raiders and nothing happened throughout the long chill night. Except that at midnight, in the inexplicable way of herded cattle, the steers stirred and roused, stood up and moved a few restless paces, and bedded down again for the remainder of darkness.

3

IN THE WAN light of morning there was early activity on the plain. The herd was a ghostly mass, submerged in the gray mists from the Cimarron, which clung to the valley floor after the air had cleared in the hills. As the scene cleared the prospects of an attack became imminent. Flanking the open crossing-place on either side of the stream, were wooded bluffs, ideal for the purpose of ambush. Most likely the raiders were already there, if there was to be an assault, hidden in the willows and cottonwoods ready to pour fire from four directions into the Triangle ranks. It would be a slaughter, a wholesome massacre, and Slim Pennell went cold all over as he studied the fog-shrouded landscape, while Colladay's square rugged face looked grim and gaunt.

The sun climbed in the east, its long level rays shredding the valley mist, as the riders finished breakfast and saddled up in preparation for the crossing. The Cimarron flowed broad and calm at this point, deep enough in the middle so the beasts would have to swim,

and the men hazing the herd would be far too busy to watch for any ambuscade. In the water or on the shore they would be caught like sitting ducks.

Slim and Colladay had saddled and ridden in on the last low ridge above the ford, as close as they could go without exposing themselves, and in a clump of scrub oak and boulders they stood watching intently, their rifles under-arm with the sights adjusted. They were within range, but too far away to be accurate or of much assistance.

Montauk and Cirillo skillfully built up their point and strung it out to start the cross-river driver, Montauk luring the lead steers into the water and splashing on ahead of them, while Cirillo fell back to work the swing with Oswall, Linn, Satterlee, and others. Pushing the beef from behind and hanging back to bring up the drag were Rexford, Kendy, Roslyn, Bonett, and Doying. The outlaw's plan was instantly obvious to Slim. The attack would come after the main body of the steers was across and the best Pennell men were pressing the drag into midstream. That showed planning from within and indicated the red-handed guilt of Montauk and Cirillo. With diabolical cunning, they had arranged for the honest Triangle hands to work the crossing before they died, deliver the herd directly into the bandits' possession on the other side of the river. It filled Slim with such red fury that the unconscious grating of his teeth was audible, and Dan Colladay laid a large friendly hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Take it easy, Slim," he said gently. "We'll go in there when it starts—if it does start."

Montauk had his point across now, and a long ragged loop of horned cattle was strung from shore to shore. Horsemen in the water kept the line moving and intact, while riders on the near bank went on feeding steers into the stream, the boys of the drag applying pressure from the rear. Cattle bawled and cowboys yelled above the incessant splashing and thudding, the Cimarron was churned white and dust boiled up along the flats. The sun was higher now, flooding the plain with clear golden light, and the morning grew warm and then hot as the drive went clamoring on, but Slim Pennell was still cold inside, chilled and sick to the bone.

"Keep 'em comin', keep 'em rollin'!" the hoarse cries in the sunshot dust. "Yippi yi, git along, you dogies, git along, you steers! Push 'em in, prod 'em along, hold that line in the water, keep 'em movin'! Yippi yi yay, git along cow critters! Pour it on 'em, boys! Yippi yi-yoh, whiskey and beer in Abilene!"

It seemed to go on forever, but at last Slim saw that the drag riders, his friends, were moving up on the riverbank, lashing the tail-end of the herd toward the water in a yellow haze of dust. "Now, Dan," Slim murmured. "It'll be comin' now." Colladay nodded morbidly and levered a shell into the chamber of his Remington. Finally the last of the steers wallowed into the shallows, wading and then swimming across the current, horsemen slashing at horned heads and snouts to

keep the sagging arch of beef unbroken in mid-river.

ONLY Bonnett was left, sitting his horse on the near shore to see that none of the laggard creatures turned back. A rifle cracked out from the northeast bluff. Bonett stiffened in the saddle, doubled forward over the pommel, and fell headfirst to the trampled grass. Riflefire burst out in flaming sheets from all four of the wooded promontories, beating the water into a froth, spouting the surface with small geysers. Saddles were emptied swiftly, horses screamed and thrashed in their watery death throes, and other mounts plunged about in a frenzy, riderless and terrified. Cattle bellowed and tuned belly up as stray shots struck them, and the Cimarron ran suddenly red with blood.

On the far bank, Montauk drew and shot Satterlee in the back, while Cirillo threw down and killed another rider, whom Slim could not identify at that distance. Two more Triangle men went down over there, as Osswall and Linn turned treacherously and shot them out of their saddles Slim and Collady were riding in, firing at the near bluffs, but there were no targets in sight and the traitors across the river were out of range.

Rexford, caught under a storm of lead in the shoals on this side, swung his horse back ashore and rode straight at the southeast headland like a maniac. Miraculously unhit, Rexford was almost to the foot of the bluff when his horse cartwheeled end-over-end, catapulting him into the brush like a rag doll. The other riders were all gone, knocked from their swimming horses into the seething bloody current, Doying, Kendy, Roslyn, either dead or dying. Although Slim thought Doying had dived from the saddle of his own volition, and he might be still alive among the carcasses that were being washed downstream to the south. Doying was a good swimmer.

It was all over as quick as that, the drag steers scrambling out on the far western shore, the herd in the hands of Montauk, Cirillo, and their associates. Slim Pennell and Dan Colladay, driving in toward the crossing, realized the utter and suicidal futility of their gesture as the outlaw guns turned on them. With bullets breathing and searching everywhere about them, Slim and Dan skidded to a stop, whirled their horses in the billowing dust, and raced back into the hills.

Taking shelter on the ridge they had started from, the blond boy and the marshal opened fire at long range as the snipers emerged and descended from the forested bluffs to cross the Cimarron. Slim and Dan dropped a couple of the raiders, but there was small satisfaction in that. The others didn't bother to come after them, or even return their shots any more. Bitter-eyed and taut-lipped, Slim Pennell and Dan Colladay watched the herd moved westward in a vast saffron dust-cloud.

Slim swore softly. "What a hell of a thing!"

"It was that," Dan Colladay agreed. "As cold-blooded a killin' as I've ever seen, son. But they'll pay for it, every one of 'em! I'll have an army of deputies waitin' when they pull into Abilene."

"You think they'll go there?"

"Sure, it's the only place to unload the herd. They'll deliver it all right, but they'll collect lead instead of money, Slim."

"I got an idea Montauk and Cirillo, maybe with Oswall and Linn, will go back to Triangle and try to establish their innocence," Slim said. "Figurin' on pullin' another deal later."

"You want to go back and see, Slim?" said Dan Colladay. "I'll take care of the Abilene end all right, collect Big Bill's money, and come on to Shouldice with some of my boys."

"I think that's the best way to do it, Dan," Slim said. "But first, I want to see if any of our boys are left alive down here."

They found Rexford in the brush at the base of the bluff, covered with blood from a gash in his scalp, but alive and breathing, apparently not badly injured although he looked like a gory corpse. Leaving Colladay to administer first aid there, Slim Pennell swung on downstream to search the shoreline.

He was giving up hope and ready to turn back, when he spotted a limp sodden figure in the weeds and marshgrass at the water's edge. It was Doying, a bullet hole in his right arm and half-drowned, but otherwise unhurt. Doying was conscious, but too exhausted to move. He smiled faintly up at the boy.

"Some mess, huh, Slim? Sure glad to see you, kid." Doying shook his dripping head weakly. "They jumped all over us, boy. Never saw nothin' like it."

Slim Pennell helped him into the saddle and led the bay gelding back upstream. Rexford had come to, his curly brown head bandaged, his sharp face pallid and drawn but grinning at the sight of Slim and Doying. Colladay went to work at once on Doying's wounded arm.

"How the hell'd you get here, Slim?" asked Rexford, puffing wearily on a cigaret. "Wasn't that the damnedest bushwhackin' though? I been shot at before, and plenty, but I never saw lead comin' that thick!"

When Doying was patched up, his arm in a sling, Dan Collady said: "How'll you boys travel now?"

"There's a ranch a few miles back," Rexford said. "We can borrow a couple of horses there."

"Well, I'm off to set up a little reception committee in Abilene," said Colladay with a grave smile. "I'll see you in Shouldice the first of the week, or out at the Triangle. And Slim—you'd better save Montauk and Cirillo for me, son."

"I wouldn't guarantee it, Dan," said Slim Pennell.

"I know how you feel, Slim, and I don't blame you," Colladay told him. "But be careful. There may be four of 'em, all bad ones."

Slim nodded his tow-head, his lean boyish face solemn.

"There's three of us, Marshal," grinned Rexford. "That's aplenty."

"Sure," drawled Doying. "I'm hell with my left hand."

"Well, I'll get there as soon as I can," Dan Collady said.

"Good luck, Dan," said Slim Pennell. "We'll probably save enough of 'em for you to plant, anyway."

4

THE LIGHTS of Shouldice bloomed ahead in the valley of the Washita. The three riders were heading into town because Slim had a hunch the men they were after would go there first, instead of to the ranch. Montauk and his followers would want to find out what kind of stories, if any, were circulating about the loss of the Triangle-P herd. Monty would want to make an official report to the sheriff, before he faced Big Bill Pennell. If things didn't shape up right he never would face Big Bill.

They had ridden in silence most of the day, still shocked from that massacre on the Cimarron, not feeling much like talking. Doying was weak from loss of blood and the grinding pain in his wounded arm. Rexford, still sick and groggy from his head injury, swayed in the saddle from time to time, and mumbled occasionally about that big drink he was going to get when they hit town.

"The *Southern Belle's* the first saloon we come to," Rexford said. "And that's where I'm goin', pardners."

Slim Pennell was so filled with hatred and the lust to kill, that he could scarcely tolerate any other thought.

All he wanted was to get Montauk, Cirillo and the others under his gun, and in the white heat of his intense fury he thought: *Shot through the heart, I'll still live long enough to see them dead in front of me.* It was like a blaze of madness in his brain, a torrent of fire in his blood.

Nearing Shouldice it occurred to Slim that it was only Wednesday night, only thirty-odd hours since he had ridden out of here alone. It seemed like ages ago, in another lifetime, that he had walked out of the *Imperial,* mounted and struck off toward the Kiowas. Now he was coming back with Rexford and Doying, hurt more than they would admit and riding borrowed horses, and all those others were dead out there along the Cimarron, murdered without a chance.

"You boys'll have to see Doc Graham when we get in," Slim said.

"Not till I get that drink, Slim," grinned Rexford.

"Colladay done a nice job on my arm," Doying said, but his teeth were on edge with the agony perpetuated by the motion of his horse. Doying had lost his gun in the river, but he had Slim's extra Colt tucked in under his belt within reach of his left hand. Rexford had retained his .44, in spite of his flying tumble into the brush and rocks. Slim hoped they wouldn't have to use those guns. He wanted to do this all by himself, and to hell with the odds.

They clomped across the South Bridge over the Washita, the timbers booming hollowly under the hoofs, and swung into the main street of Shouldice. Ahead on the left was the *Southern Belle,* its hitch-rail lined with horses, and Rexford grinned and licked his dry lips. Kerosene flares and lamps streaked the murky dimness with flickering yellow light.

A barking dog frisked across the street before the three riders, and a little girl ran out in pursuit, straight at the horsemen. Slim shouted a warning, reined back on his shying bay. The child screamed shrilly and fell back in the dirt, as the horses loomed terrifyingly close. The pungent smell of warm dust was in Slim's nostrils as he stepped down to comfort the girl. Rexford and Doying pulled up, smiling at the sight of the long lanky boy cuddling the crying child.

"She ain't hurt, is she, Slim?" Rexford called. "I'm goin' on after that drink." He waved and urged his mount forward again.

"You're sure goin' to make a good family man, Slim," said Doying, and trotted on after Rex.

A short fat woman waddled out, jabbering excitedly and taking the small girl from Slim's arms. "She's just scared some," Slim said, slipping a silver dollar into a tiny clenched hand.

The mother thanked him and went away, scolding the child in a gentle soothing manner. Slim gathered up his reins and walked on, leading the gelding, relieved to stretch his long saddle-cramped legs.

Rexford and Doying had angled into the rack in front of the harness and saddle shop on the right, opposite the *Southern Belle Saloon.* Rexford dismounted at once, but Doying lingered in the saddle, slumped wearily with the anguish of his right arm. A man stepped out from under the next awning, halted and stood stark and star-

ing incredulously at Rexford. It was Osswall, a lumpy bunched figure, shoulders hoisted, elbows out, fingers clawed wide. Rexford stood loose and easy before him, a dim smile on his sharp-featured face.

"This ain't no ghost, Ossie," drawled Rexford. "But you're goin' to be one, boy."

THEY SWUNG into action swiftly, simultaneously, their guns rising and blasting together in one thunderous explosion, the spurting flames meeting and merging halfway between them. Osswall rocked back, teetered forward, dropped to his knees, lurched sideways and curled up in the gravel. Oswall jerked spasmodically and was still, a shapeless blotch in the lamplight.

Rexford spun slowly from the impact, walked across the street toward the saloon in strange stiff-legged splay-footed strides, lunging from side to side. Stumbling on the slat sidewalk, Rexford pitched forward, caught himself on one swing-door, swayed in and back out on it. Letting go, Rexford tottered backward, braced and came momentarily erect, sighed wearily and fell dead on his face on the planks in front of the *Southern Belle*.

While this was going on, and Slim Pennell was hurrying up the street with his horse in tow, Linn stepped out of the nearby shadows and fired up at Doying, still mounted. The borrowed horse reared and caught the bullet, snorted, bucked wildly and bolted forward, striking Linn and hurling him back against the loading-platform of the grain-and-feed store.

The horse, crazed with pain and fear, raced on along the thoroughfare, people scattering frantically before its mad flight. Doying, his right arm useless in the sling, clung on somehow with the reins in his left hand, his steel-thewed rider's legs gripping hard, his body jolted and pain-wracked as the horse bounded and bucked. Sheriff Araban and two deputies ran out to head off the runaway steed near the *Imperial*. The mount whirled and charged back down the street the way it had come, Doying still in the saddle but unable to reach for his gun. Women screamed and men shouted, as Linn opened fire at the horseman from the corner of the grain store, the flashes spearing out jet on jet.

Slim Pennell reached the hitch-rack in front of the saddle shop just as Doying's horse went down in a plunging fall, flinging Doying clear overhead, the dust storming up yellow in the lamplight. Doying twisted desperately to land on his left side and spare his wounded arm as much as possible, but the agony must have been hideous. Doying rolled over in the dirt, left hand ripping the Colt out from under his belt, cocking and lining it.

Linn threw down on him, but his hammer clicked on an empty shell. Snarling, Linn went for his left-hand gun, but never got it out. Flame leaped at him with a blinding roar as Doying triggered from the ground. The smash of the slug lifted Linn away from the loading-platform, twirled him against an awning post, stretched him over an empty hitch-rail, head down in the dust of the street.

Doying got up slowly, awkwardly, left hand holding the gun and clamped against the shattering pain in his bandaged right arm. Without looking to either side, Doying started walking toward the *Southern Belle* where Rexford lay before the batwing doors. Slim Pennell was crossing to meet Doying when another gunshot split the excited babbling chaos of Main Street, and Slim had one fleeting glimpse of Cirillo's dark sleek mustached face. Doying, shot in the back, jogged a few steps forward, sagged to his knees, and toppled headlong at Slim Pennell's feet. Slim crouched beside him, as the crowd closed swirling around them. Doying was still alive, turning his tortured face to the boy.

"Rex?" he panted. "How's Rex?"

"Rex is all right," lied Slim. "And

so are you, Doy..." He stood erect, towering above the milling throng. "Somebody get a doctor here."

"Doc Graham's comin'," a man said. "Make way for the doc, folks."

"Fine," said Slim Pennell, bending once more. "I'll be seein' you, Doy."

"Careful—kid," moaned Doying. "Two—more—of 'em."

"They're for me, Doy," smiled Slim. "They're mine."

Straightening, Slim Pennell started striding through the close-packed ranks, and men fell away before him when they saw the light in his eyes and the look on his young face. Afterward, people said that Slim seemed to be about ten feet tall that night, a tow-headed skinny giant with murderous fury blazing in him so bright that strong tough men turned away in awe and horror. Only Sheriff Araban tried to stop the blond boy, and Slim shook that big man off as if he were a baby, strode on without even glancing at him.

UP THE STREET, Chill Cirillo saw Slim Pennell coming in his direction, and for once that cold-blooded killer felt a flutter of panic, felt like running for his life. He was moving away from the tall boy, almost running, when mocking voices jeered at him from the *Imperial Saloon:* "Where you goin', Cirillo? What's your hurry, Chill? You ain't backin' down for Big Bill's boy, are you, Cirillo?"

Cirillo stopped with a snarl and swore viciously under his breath, cursing Montauk for being out after that girl instead of here where he belonged, cursing himself for giving these Shouldice loafers a chance to laugh at him. Well, he'd show them now. Cirillo stepped out into mid-street with his old easy arrogance, a graceful compact figure in his dapper clothes, white teeth glistening in under his neat black mustache.

The street cleared as if by magic, as Slim Pennell went walking on toward the waiting Cirillo, in steady swinging strides, his long arms hanging loosely, the right one brushing the sheath on his right thigh. A hushed tension filled the night, and men stood rooted and breathless along the way. Cirillo remembered that Osswall and Linn were dead, Montauk wasn't here, and he was all alone. Cirillo's hand swept to his gun, and he fired—too soon. A little fountain of dirt splashed against Slim's boots.

Slim Pennell drew now, smoothly, almost deliberately, pacing on in unbroken stride as his Colt came up, cocked and level. Cirillo's gun barrel jerked higher and flared once more. Slim Pennell came on, as if impervious to bullets, unafraid and unhittable, and flame burst from his big right hand. Cirillo reeled back and buckled, seemed to shrivel and shrink on his jacking legs. Turning slowly, faltering like a dying top, Cirillo fired into the ground, took three grotesque dancing steps, and sprawled full length in the soft clouding dust.

Slim Pennell walked on as if nothing had happened, looked briefly at Cirillo, then at the men massed outside the *Imperial.* "Anybody seen Montauk?" There was no answer beyond a general shaking of heads. Slim turned to the hitch-rail, saw Cirillo's Triangle-P horse, unwrapped the reins and stepped into the saddle. "I'll find him, I reckon," Slim said to nobody in particular, and pulled away from the rack into the street.

Sheriff Araban lumbered up the street, shouting: "Hold on there, boy! This has gone far enough. You're under arrest!"

Slim Pennell laughed with hollow mockery. "For killin' a cattle rustlin' murderer? Tell it to Marshal Dan Colladay." And he rode out toward the Millar home on the outskirts of town.

Beyond the lights the night was black, the moon and stars clouded over, the wind blowing strongly with the threat of a storm, thunder muttering and rumbling in the hills. It came with

all the stunning suddenness of a summer deluge. Lightning split the sky with jagged blue-green flares, thunder rolled in toppling crashes among the peaks, and the rain slashed down in windblown sheets. Man and horse were instantly drenched, but Slim Pennell rode on, oblivious to everything but getting at Montauk.

Slim was on the North Bridge over the Washita when he sensed somebody coming from the opposite direction, even before the added vibration of the boards warned him. Thunder still volleyed in the mountains, the rain had settled into a steady downpour, and a vivid lightning-flash exposed the two riders glaringly to one another. Slim heard Montauk's cry as sound tore his own throat, and he jabbed with his spurs to put the bay forward with a leap as Montauk came charging at him. The horses collided with jarring force at the center of the bridge, hoofs thrashing and scrabbling on wet wood as they reared high on the impact.

A gun exploded so close in Slim Pennell's face it seared his eyeballs. Slim's Colt was in his right hand, flung too high for shooting. Whipping the barrel down at Montauk's head, Slim felt a solid shock tingle up his forearm, and saw Monty bend under the blow, keel from the saddle, his horse galloping off in the rain. Slim kicked clear of his stirrups and jumped down, gun in hand. Lightning showed Montauk writhing on his back, thunder obscured the roar of his weapon, but Slim felt the close passage of the bullet. Driving forward, Slim kicked wickedly at the man's head as another blaze tongued up at him.

SLIM'S RIGHT hand went numb and useless, the .44 dropping from it to the rainsoaked planks, but before Montauk could fire again, Slim stamped down on his gunhand, feeling the bones give under his boot as he ground it into the wood. Montauk screamed and lashed out with his own bootheels at the groin, but Slim sprang clear, dodged back in fast, planting his knees on that broad chest, clubbing his left fist into Montauk's face. Again and again Slim struck, exulting in the feel of Montauk's hated flesh beneath his hammering hand, until with a desperate effort Monty heaved him off against the rail.

They rolled and scrambled up, panting and slipping on the wet surface, the rain beating over them and lightning bursting weirdly above. Both had broken right hands, and Montauk was reaching for his left-hand gun when Slim slashed his own left fist into that bloody battered face. Montauk's auburn head snapped far back in a greenish-white flare from the skies, and he floundered onto the railing, lolled there half-senseless. Driving in savagely, Slim slugged him again, clutched his thick throat in sinewy fingers, choking and forcing him back, back over the rail.

Montauk's once-beautiful amber eyes bulged horribly in the lightning's glare. He tried frenziedly to use his knees and boots, but his strength was ebbing and gone. Stamping down on the man's feet, Slim increased his pressure on the throat, bending Montauk back and down until he was doubled

backward like a horseshoe over the rail. Something seemed to crack as Montauk went limp and unconscious, and with a final surge of hate and fury Slim Pennell flung that loose bulk overboard into the dark rushing water of the Washita. Instinctively he went and lifted his Colt from the planks.

Then, sobbing and gasping for air, the pain stabbing deep in his right hand and arm, Slim leaned on the wet wood, sick and exhausted in the gusty slanting rain.

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After a timeless interval, he pushed himself erect and turned, dully surprised to find Helen Millar sitting there on horseback, holding the reins of the gray gelding, that had been Cirillo's.

"You were right—about him, Slim," she said through a curtain of rain. "He was—bad. And Slim, I want to thank you..."

"Thank me—for what?" Slim took his reins and hauled himself into the saddle beside her. "He killed half of Triangle-P. I didn't do anythin'—for you. Go on home, Helen."

"But Slim!" she cried, her lovely face upturned to his, heedless of the rain and wind.

"It'll take some time," Slim Pennell said, "to wash away the taste of Montauk. So long, Helen... I'll see you—later." He booted the gelding into a lope and rode back across the bridge toward the storm-blurred lights of Shouldice.

In town, Slim dismounted in font of the *Imperial,* mildly amazed to see the familiar giant frame of his father among the men talking there. Big Bill Pennell came to him at once, laying a mighty arm around his soaked shoulders, drawing him in under the awning.

"You're hurt, Slim," said Big Bill, and raised his voice. "Somebody call Doc Graham up here fast!" He turned back to the boy. "Doying told me all about it, Slim—Doy's goin' to be all right. But all the rest of them boys dead, and it's my fault, Slim..."

"No, Dad. Don't blame yourself."

"You got Montauk—too?"

Slim Pennell nodded. "I'm needin' a drink, Dad."

They went into the *Imperial* and stood at the bar. Slim, feeling self-conscious and embarrassed with so many eyes fixed on him, was dimly aware that the same bartender was on duty. Big Bill called for a bottle and drinks for the house.

"Not tonight, Bill," said the barkeeper. "Nobody can buy Slim Pennell a drink in here... It's on the house, for everybody, and we're all drinkin' to Slim Pennell!"

"Thanks, Sam," said Slim, and looked at his father with a thin tired smile. "You'll be needin' a tophand, Dad?"

Big Bill laughed and clasped the tall blond boy to him with tender strength. "No, Slim. I reckon I got one," said Big Bill Pennell. "One of the best."

★

A Topnotch Story of the Ring

YOU FOUGHT FINE

by Richard Brister

appears in the September issue of

SUPER SPORTS

Special Feature

TIGHT PLACE FOR A TRAPPER

by Harold Gluck

"WELL, youngsters," said Uncle Job, a veteran trapper, to a party of young fellows bound on an amateur trapping excursion to the Rocky Mountains, "when you have toted traps and peltries, and fit Injuns as long as I have, you'll certainly have considerable more experience than you have now. Ha! ha! yer think, maybe, it's a mighty nice time ye'll have on't out on the trapping grounds, and I ain't going to say as how yer won't, but take my word for it, ye'll wish yourselves back in the settlements many a time afore ye'll get there. What with fighting and hiding from Injuns and them pesky grizzlies, and living with them spindle-shanked Diggers, on the other side of the mountains—sometimes for weeks together, and nothing but pine cones and such trash as luck happens to throw in yer way, to keep soul and body together—yer time'll be anything but specially agreeable, till yer gets used to it, and then ye'll find it barely endurable. It's a mighty hard life, anyhow, boys!"

"Why, then, Uncle Job, do you go back again to the plains?" they asked.

"Well there, boys, yer have me, anyhow," answered the old man; "and to be right down honest with yer—I likes it! It's a fact, as sure as dry prairie grass'll burn. I would not live a whole month in Saint Lewy for all the money there, if I could not be allowed to spend the balance of the time out in the mountain country. I'm used to it, youngsters, and city air is rank poison to me; besides, I'd spoil for the want of a fight with some of the red varmints of Blackfeet, Pawnees, and Poncas—for that's the best part of life on the plain, boys. And now," continued the old trapper, as he lit his stone pipe, "as I'm in the humor on't, I'll tell yer about a fight—and a long battle it was, too—I had with a party of them Blackfeet over on the Sweet-Water. It was something over twelve years ago, one fall, when I was trapping on the head waters of the Columbia.

We had at the post about a dozen greenhorns—just like yourselves, only a few months from the settlements—who hadn't yet got toughened to the kind of life we had to lead. Some of 'em was about dying with the ager, and not a dose of medicine, or even a blessed drop of whiskey, to save them with. So, as I knew every part of the country from the Pacific to Saint Lewy, I was ordered by the head trader of

the post, to go to Fort Laramie and bring back a supply of calomel, Queen Anne, and sich truck, for our sick men.

The distance was about six hundred miles over the mountains. We had come the spring before to the western side of the range, by way of the Sweet-Water valley pass, and I concluded to take that route again toward Laramie.

Well, arter I had got over the main ridge, I kept along the south side of the Wind river mountains, and stopped one day on the Green river to make me a new pair of moccasins; for the rough traveling of the hills had left me barefooted. While I was stitching away at my moccasins, I remembered a cache (that is, a lot of furs or provisions hidden or stowed away until it should be convenient to remove them) a party of us had made the spring before, about a day's travel out of my regular route. It was on the south branch of the Sweet-Water. We had started from the head of the Platte, on our way to the Columbia, with a small drove of pack mules, loaded with provisions for the new post, and when on the South Branch one of the creturs give out, we had to cache his cargo. It was a package of jerked venison and a sack of flour, with a small bag of rice for the sick, when we had 'em, and a five gallon keg of whiskey—genuine Monongahela—none of yer common corn juice. It is a common practice with us trappers to cache our provisions where we know they will be safe for some future journey that way.

Well, as I worked away at my moccasins, I all at once got to be mighty thirsty, and the thoughts of the whiskey popped right into my head. Says I to myself, says I, "Job, wouldn't you like to have one good suck at that 'ere little red keg, specially when nobody at the post would any wiser or poorer for it?" And I reckoned I would. So I finished the buckskin, and the next morning started bright and early for the cache.

Now, as I said, it was one day's journey from my route, and it would take another day to put me on the right course again; that, ye know, would use up two days that I certainly ought to give to my sick comrades at the post. But I argued in this way: "Now I'm pesky dry for a drink of whiskey. I'm actilly feeling bad for the want of it, and if I gratify my natural longing I'll certainly feel better arter it, and I can then tread so much faster that I shall more'n make up for the lost time." And that's the way I reconciled it to my conscience.

WELL, I REACHED the South Branch by the middle of the afternoon, and going down the stream a little ways from where I struck it, I found the cave where we had cached our provisions. It was a pretty large one—I should reckon about twice the length of those boat's cabin, but 'twant more'n half as high. I crawled into the narrow mouth of it, and drew my rifle in arter me; and as soon as my eyes got kinder used to the dim light, right up there in the corner I found everything all right. The jolly little red keg seemed actilly to laugh all over at the sight of an old friend. And well it might, for it had been shut up there in the dark for more'n six months, with nothing but the flour, and rice, and dried meat, to keep it company.

I pulled out my sharp pointed bowie and tapped the head of it in no time. But just as I raised the little fellow to get a taste of him, I heard a tramping of horses' feet outside, and the howling of fifteen or twenty Blackfeet. I had to drop the keg before a drop of the blessed stuff had wet my thirsty lips; and well it was I did, for at that moment the entrance to the place was darkened by an Injun that had been fool enough to follow me. I raised my rifle, and let him have it; his comrades dragged him out by the feet, and gave another yell when they found he'd been wiped out. While they were tugging away at his carcass, I busied myself in reloading my rifle, to be ready for the next visitor. But though they kept up a terrible hillabiloo, they didn't attempt to crawl into the cave any more.

Thinks I, "Now's your time, Job"; and raising little red to the top of the cavern, I took a good, long, glorious drink! I tell yer, boys, it's a fact that I have had many a good drink of the strong water in my day, but never in my life did I taste anything that was quite equal to that old Monongahela. It braced me right up, and I'd hardly had it down my throat, than I felt that I was a host in myself, and enough, single-handed as I was, for all the Blackfeet west of the Mississippi.

Arter a few minutes three or four rifles were poked cautiously into the hole, and fired at random into the cave toward me. But, standing one side, I let them peg away. They were only using up their ammunition, and the sooner they got rid of that the better for me.

Next they sent a shower of arrows through the opening, but with no better effect than with their bullets. In the meantime, I had found a little hole through the rocks just large enough for the barrel of my gun, and watching a good chance, when they were thick about the mouth, I took good aim and popped away at them, sending half an ounce of lead through the bodies of no less than three of them at once. At this the Injuns fell back, yelling vengeance, and I took another refreshing pull at little red. "For," says I, "Job, now it's your treat, and here's to as good luck the next shot!" But they didn't try the shooting game any more, as they found that was a game I could play at as well as themselves, and I held all the trump cards. They kept losing, while I continued to hold my own.

ARTER THEY had been quiet for a considerable time, I poked my head out of the cave and peeped down the stream, where I could see them gathering armsful of dry sticks and grass, which I at once knew they intended to bring up to the cavern and smoke me out. I hadn't thought of this before, and thinks I, they have got me now, sure. I can fight Injuns, so long as my ammunition holds out; but when it comes to fire and smoke, I ain't a match nohow for them, shut up in the limestone rocks.

Presently they came back agin to the mouth of the cave in such a direction that I couldn't bring old kill-deer to bear upon them; and piling up their combustibles, set fire to it. The wind happened that evening to set directly into the place, and in a few minutes the nasty smudge began to suffocate me. I had to crawl farther and farther into the place as the smoke followed me; and I could hear the Injuns piling on the grass and wood all the time. They found they could get me out by no other means, and were now trying to choke me to death with the smoke. But, fortunately, as I ran away from it, I saw a little streak of daylight ahead of me. It was a crevice in the rock, through which the rays of the setting sun was streaming, as much as to say, "Be of good heart, Job: they can't smoke you out so long as you choose to breathe through this nice little air-hole."

I reached the place and laid down, breathing the pure air, and laughing at the fools, who were yelling and dancing for joy at the cute trick they thought they were playing me.

IT SO HAPPENED that through the same crevice that admitted the light and air, I discovered a nice little pool of fresh water had formed on the floor of the cavern. Now, thought I, if I only had the little red fellow yonder, and the provisions, I could do first rate. So holding my breath, I crawled back agin into the smoke, and catching the keg in one hand and the package of jerked meat in the other, I went back to my breathing-hole, and made a comfortable supper, while the black fiends outside were wasting their breath and fuel for nothing.

Arter I had satisfied my appetite and taken another pull at the strong water, I laid down for a nap, for I knew the Injuns wouldn't trouble me while they kept up their smoke. Well, I had a pretty good night's rest, considering I had to keep one eye open. And in the

morning, after the smoke had settled, I sat quietly at the side of the opening, expecting Mr. Injun to creep through arter my scalp. They had no doubt I had given up the ghost, and though they were good for my carcass. But they reckoned without the host, for no sooner did a Blackfoot show his head than pop! a pill from kill-deer settled the job for him.

Them Injuns, I reckon, thought they had holed the devil himself, for they war so surprised when they heard the bark of the old rifle, and found another of them wiped out, that they even forgot to yell. They found that smoke couldn't kill the old man; and then they tried another plan. Their game now was to starve me out. And here again I had the trump cards in my own hands. The fact was, they hadn't the least idea that the cave had been used as a cache; and when they saw me take to it, they thought that I had discovered them, and was hiding away from them there. They didn't count on the good things I had there, all to myself.

I could understand enough of their gibberish to learn that they had determined to stand guard over me till I should be forced to yield to starvation, at least. But I had, you know, about two months' provision with me, and so long as that held out, and little red give down, I was all right. So I made up my mind to pass the time as agreeably as possible.

I could hear that parties of Injuns rode away from the place every morning, and others come agin to take their place, standing guard over me by turns. At length, after four days, when they supposed I was about starved to such a degree as to be no longer dangerous to approach, a redskin poled his head into the opening, and began to crawl cautiously into the cave. I was watching for him, and, clutching him by the windpipe, so that he could make no noise, I drew my bowie across his throat, and dragged him into the darkness. Presently another followed, and him I served in precisely the same way. Arter some time, another Injun put his head down into the hole and called to his comrades. At this moment I leveled my rifle and let him have it. So, that morning I had wiped out three more of the rascals.

THEY DIDN'T trouble me any more for some days—I think it must have been nigh a week, when making sure I had yielded to the fate they had decreed me, another attempt was made to enter the cavern. I kept at a distance till two of them had come in, when I sprang upon them, and with my rifle and knife made a finish of them too.

Now indeed it was that the Injuns were really sure that they had none but the very Evil One to deal with; and filling the air with their yells of disappointed vengeance, they mounted their mustangs, and I could hear them riding away down the banks of the river.

Arter a while, when I thought the coast was clear, I ventured to the open air, and mounting upon the top of the river bank, I could see them spurring away over the prairie as if the Evil Spirit was behind them. I had been pent up in that dark hole for more than three weeks, as near as I could guess; and the strong light of the sun almost blinded me at first; but arter a little while I got used to it; and I tell you what, boys, if this green earth and the blue skies ever looked beautiful to my eyes, they did on that blessed morning when I crept outen that living grave, for yer must remember it was half full of the carcasses of them Blackfeet I had killed.

"But, Uncle Job," asked one of the young men, "how did you sick men at the post get along without the medicine?"

"Poorly," was the reply. "Two of them had died. But they waited ten days for me to come back, and finding I didn't, they sent another man to Fort Laramie for the medicine, and the others were saved.

"I reached the post agin arter an absence of about a month; and as I didn't like to acknowledge I had turned

out of my way for the sake of the whiskey, while my comrades were suffering for the want of what I had been sent for; I said nothing about it more than that I had been a prisoner among the Injuns, and managed to make my escape arter a hard fight.

Some months arterwards, when a party of us were trapping out on the Medicine Bow, we concluded to make a visit to our cache. The place was just as I had left it, only the bodies of the Blackfeet I had wiped out had been removed. The sack of flour and bag of rice were just as the spring party had cached them; but to the surprise of all of us, and to none more than myself, the whiskey keg was empty and the dried venison all gone.

"The fact was, boys," concluded Uncle Job, "although I had pretty considerable of a time of it with them cussed Blackfeet, upon the whole I felt too much ashamed of the affair to let on a single word about it."

★

JEFF MILTON

(continued from page 86)

saloon, walked in and confronted him. "Hardin, you're a damned liar; you knew nothing of the McRose affair until several days after he was killed."

Hardin sat in his chair and told Jeff that it was safe to talk to him like that because he wasn't armed. Jeff towered over the killer and his piercing eyes blazed.

"Again you're a damned liar. You're armed and both you and I know it. Now, you either tell the men in this saloon that you lied when you said you paid me off for killing McRose, or start shooting."

Hardin, the killer and terror of the Southwest was white and cowed. "Gentlemen, I lied when I said I'd hired this here Marshal to kill McRose."

Jeff backed out of the saloon and Hardin never met him again, although the vicious little killer went on to shoot his way across the early West—until he, in turn, got his.

The saga of Jeff Milton is one that would rank beside such truly fearless men of the Old West as Will Drannan, Kit Carson and Sam Bowie. He outshone, outfought and outlived such spurious Westerners as Buffalo. Bill Cody, Texas Jack, and others of the spotlight-variety—but not the truly modest, great men who, unknown, unsung and for the most part eclipsed by the would-bes, lie today in quiet graves, their only reward being the certain knowledge that, but for their efforts, American history would not have its own epic page of Western greatness.

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A Gripping, Action-Packed Novelet of Worlds To Come

TEMPLE OF DESPAIR

by M. C. Pease

These, and others, are in the October issue of

DYNAMIC SCIENCE FICTION

The Mail Pouch

A DEPARTMENT FOR OUR READERS

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

Mr. Pete Carter, whose mother was a Sioux and whose father was captured and reared by the Sioux, has written to me criticizing my statements in regard to Indians having beards, and blond or red-headed Indians that were in my letter regarding the so-called "white Indians".

I do not think that Mr. Carter quite understood my meanings. I did not intend to imply that all or even the majority of Indians wear mustaches or beards, but merely that all the North American Indians I have known have a *natural* growth of hair on the face—and heavy—and that *if they wished to do so,* they could raise respectable beards or mustaches.

Neither do I refer to half or quarter bloods. Big Elk, a full blooded Oglala Sioux, the grandson of Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, who lived with us for about a year, had a heavy growth of beard and shaved daily, although prefering a bit of broken glass to a razor. My good friend Hotopi, the Cheyenne grand opera singer, has a heavy growth of beard, and shaves daily. Chief White Eagle, an Oglala Sioux adopted son of Buffalo Bill Cody, is also a daily shaver; and I have many friends among the Blackfeet, Shoshones, Arapahos, Utes, Nez-Perces, Chippewas, Pottawattomis, Winnebagos, and other tribes—all of whom find daily shaving essential.

A very old Pawnee friend wears quite a luxuriant mustache, and a full-blooded Osage, whom I employed for two years while in Panama, was as bearded as the proverbial "pard" after a few weeks in the jungle without shaving. Old photographs of Manuelito, and other Navajos, taken a century ago show him with a mustache, and other Navajos with mustaches and beards. The old chroniclers mention one of the famous chiefs who joined the British army during the Revolutionary war as "growing a spade beard in order to appear more like his fellow white officers".

Regarding the "white", blond and red headed (as well as black) Indians: All are the results of albinism, melanism or erythrism. Albinism is the entire absence of pigment in the skin and hair. Complete albinism is not uncommon among Negroes, but is seldom seen among Indians. This is partly due to the fact that most tribes con-

sidered such "freaks" unlucky and did not permit them to live. Some tribes, however, such as some of the Pueblos and the San Blas of Panama considered these "moon children" sacred; and, as a result, many full albinos with white hair and pink eyes are to be seen among the San Blas, while partial albinos, blonds of various shades, are not rare among some Pueblo tribes.

It has been stated by very eminent ethnologists that albinos, or partial albinos, have been found among the members of every existing tribe in the Unites States. Partial albinism is not unusual among the white races—the very pale "platinum" and other blonds that often appear in brunette families being partial albinos.

Melanism is rare among both Indians and whites. However, I knew one Sioux, a relative of Sitting Bull, who was as black as any pure-blooded African Negro. Like many of the melanistic "freaks", he was deaf and dumb. Here in Florida I know a white man, who in youth was as fair skinned as the rest of his family, who became melantistic and is now the color of a medium-dark Negro. Erythrism, or preponderance of red pigment and lack of black pigment, is probably the commonest of all of these color abberations. It is very common among the whites. Many full-blooded Negroes have red hair and freckled, reddish skins; and I know of a number of full-blooded Indians who are "Red heads" —among them a sister of White Eagle, the Oglala Sioux, a Pawnee man; a Shoshone, and a Piute woman. All three of these abnormal pigmentation-conditions are common among the lower animals, even among fishes, molluscs and certain plants. Black panthers, black wolves, black foxes and other animals are merely melanistic forms too much.

The red-brown bears, red wolves, the red phase of the screech owls red woodchucks, etc, are common examples of erythrism, while the white buffaloes—regarded as sacred by the Indians—white deer—white crows and other birds are all albinos.

The great trouble is that when an Indian exhibits traces of albinism or erythrism, it is at once assumed that it is the result of mixed blood. In other words, parentage rather than Nature is blamed.

—*A. Hyatt Verrill*

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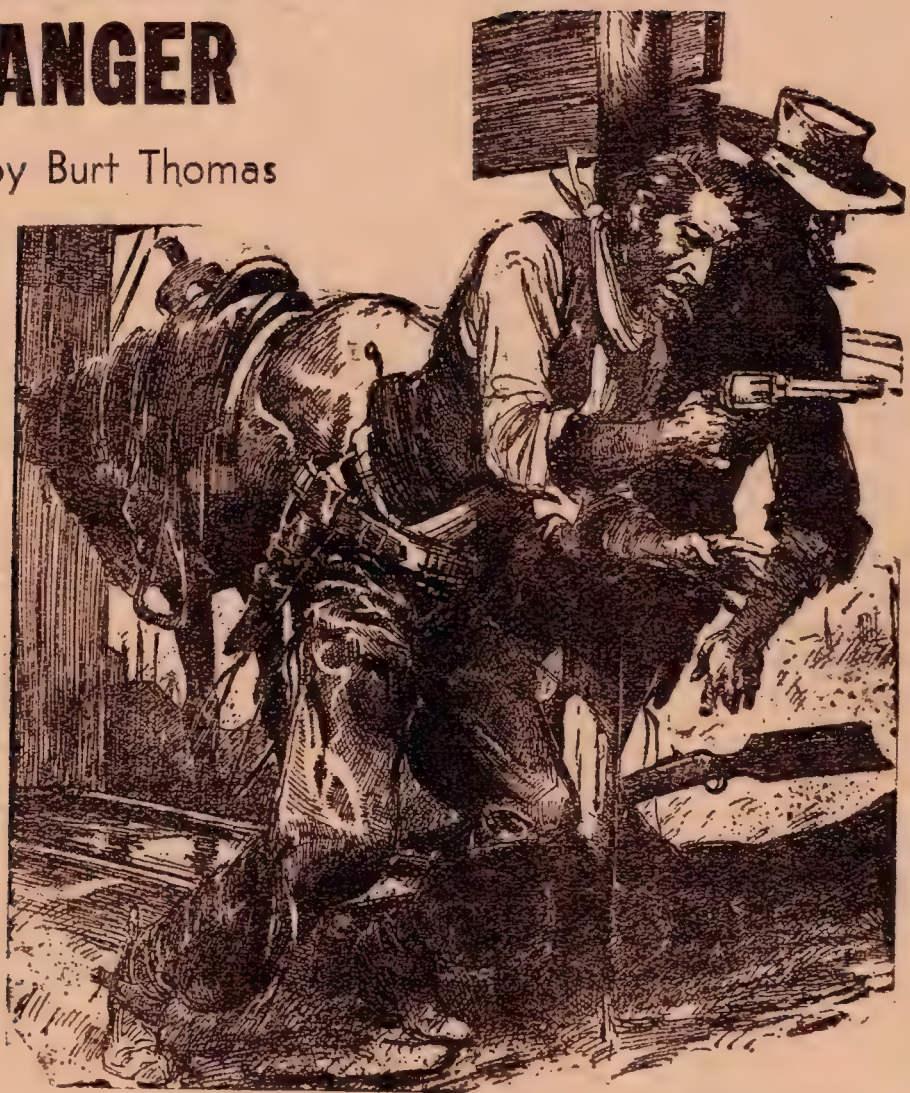
by Burt Thomas



Anger never can replace good sense. Giff knew this, inwardly, but habits of a lifetime were hard to break. This time, however, his life depended on it — he could make no mistake.

GIFF BYRAM rode with a gay song in his heart and an overstuffed wallet tucked safely inside his flannel shirt. Ahead of him loomed the weathered buildings of the town of Lodestone, and the safety of John Crider's trusty bank vault.

Giff's deep-blue eyes gazed into a bright future. Another two hours and his debt to the bank would be paid, his ranch clear. He would have money left over. And in another two days he would marry gentle, dark-eyed, soft-haired Verna Howell. Life on his Happy Valley ranch would be complete. Only two days more—

Anyone watching Giff Byram ride down the dust-padded road, tall and straight in the saddle, his hair the same red-brown color as the autumn-bare stems of the bush-willows that grew by the roadside, would never have guessed at his life-long struggle with his own violent temper.

Ranchers who had known him hardly remembered his earlier fits of anger, so careful had he been the past years. Giff proved a good neighbor, and they were glad to forget—all except one man.

Memory of a once-violent quarrel festered in Magnus Jutsen's scheming brain. And he planned his vengeance well.

As Giff rode under the hot autumn sun, he couldn't know that the rider quartering across open range on a lathered buckskin to intercept him was but an unwitting part of Jutsen's deep scheme. In plain sight of town, Giff reined in his sorrel and waited for the man.

"Al Norberg!" he called, surprised, as the pale-eyed rancher pounded close and pulled up his blowing horse. "You in trouble, Al? What's the hurry?"

Norberg gasped for breath and his voice came hoarse with urgency. "Young Danny Howell—Mag Jutsen caught him tinkerin' around the pump house. Claims he was sent deliberate to wreck his new pump—"

"Mag Jutsen must be locoed as my old bay mare! Danny wouldn't touch his machinery. The kid does sneak down to Jutsen's pond for a swim sometimes—even though his dad and his sister Verna both warned him to keep away."

"That's what I told him. But you can't argue with Mag Jutsen. He's got the kid strung up by the thumbs to the pump house door. Figures to make him tell who sent him—"

Blood pounded in Giff's head. He reined his sorrel around wildly. "I'll blame soon put Mag Jutsen straight! You comin' back with me, Al?"

Al Norberg shook his head. "Got to go on in the bank."

Giff glanced back at the town. He, too, had to see John Crider, the banker. The fat wallet in his shirt pressed hotly against his ribs. To carry it further doubled the risk. But he had belted on his six-gun when he started for town so that he could defend his money with hot lead if necessary, and if Jutsen had Danny hanging by his thumbs, there was no time to lose.

He waved to Al Norberg and spurred away across the open range.

YOUNG Danny Howell, Verna's kid brother, was a frail-looking boy and not very strong. Because of his delicate health, Clyde Howell didn't expect much work from Danny and often left him good hours of the day to rest or amuse himself. For the same reason, Verna and her father were both gentle in scolding the boy for any mistake or wrong-doing.

But in the years Giff had called on Verna, in the hours he had spent at the Howell ranch, he found Danny quiet, sincere, and unspoiled by their kindness. A close friendship had sprung up between Giff and the boy and neighbors surmised that when Giff and Verna were married, Danny would be more likely to live at Giff Byram's ranch than at home.

Thinking of the boy strung up to a pump house door brought a hot flush to Giff's neck and face. He ought to half-kill stocky, dark-featured Magnus Jutsen for a trick like that!

Once he *had* nearly killed Jutsen. The memory of it brought a chill of shame. It had been two years ago, the last time he completely lost his temper—the last time he had lost all control and blacked out.

He had caught Jutsen butchering one of his, Giff Byram's steers. But Jutsen had hidden the hide with its tell-tale brand. Giff had tackled the man with a pick-handle. He remembered striking twice, then darkness. Jutsen had not recovered for days—

and Giff had been so ashamed of his outburst of violence that even though he found the hide and had proof against Jutsen, he had pressed no charges.

Twice since, he was sure that Jutsen had branded the wrong calves, but Giff avoided a showdown, avoided even speaking to the man, afraid to trust himself.

Now he had to face Magnus Jutsen for Danny's sake. And he had to hold his temper. He set his teeth until muscles stood out in ridges along his jaw. This time he dared not lose control.

It was not an inborn thing, this affliction of his. He could trace it back to a mule-kick, a severe blow on the skull when he was very young. And with the years its violence had ebbed. True, he still blacked out in a severe spell. But the last had been two years gone. Maybe it would never come again. For gentle Verna's sake he had to control it.

Ahead he caught the glint of copper sunlight on wind-rippled water, the pond. Noisy clouds of blackbirds exploded out of the cattails as he galloped close. Beyond the shoulder of the pond stood the pump house with its single-cylinder gasoline engine and its new green-painted pump for lifting water to the orchard back of the ranch house. Magnus Jutsen could have been a top rancher if he had been content to keep his record clean.

Giff swung past the bank of cattails and saw the three saddle horses standing ground-hitched by the building. He felt his breath choke off and the violent pounding of blood in his ears, danger signs he could not mistake. This would call for all his will power.

The thick wallet in his shirt made an added burden, he felt, an added worry. The money meant a ranch clear of debt, cash for his and Verna's wedding trip, things precious beyond count. If Neil Prince, the cattle buyer, had only paid by check instead of cash—

That too had been Jutsen's doing, Giff recalled. Magnus Jutsen had sent the buyer word that all the Happy Valley ranchers demanded cash on the line at time of sale. Prince had been a trifle unhappy about it and had brought along an armed rider for protection.

"That's as much a relief as taking off my tight boots!" Neil Prince had told Giff when he paid him the last of the cash. "Never like to pack money around—can't put my brand on it!"

And now Giff was carrying that same money in his shirt, money for all the fat steers he had turned over to Prince and his riders to be hazed to market. He felt the bulge of the wallet and set his teeth to still the fuzzy pain in his head.

The rough, unpainted building loomed close. Giff rounded the corner and reined up, his eyes going at once to the slight figure of young Danny Howell whose thin arms were stretched up to the corners of the pump house door.

"Danny!" Giff yelled. He jumped from the saddle and started for the building before he saw Magnus Jutsen leaning against the opposite corner watching him.

Giff stopped in his tracks, his hand close to his holstered gun. Jutsen carried his husky shoulders high, his thick neck hunched in, and his dark features seemed always in shadow, always inscrutable. But this time the waiting, self-satisfied look on the man's dark face was too plain. He stood too quiet.

GIFF GLANCED quickly aside. Lanky, round-headed Carl Mott, one of Jutsen's all-purpose riders, stood by a clump of willows less than twenty feet away, his fingers only inches from his heavy holster. On the opposite side, Giff saw a man move out from among the waiting horses. It was Ace Lanstead, a known gunman in Jutsen's pay. Giff, in his haste, had ridden right past him. Now he was trapped.

Giff looked from Jutsen to the strained, pale face of the boy against the door, and a chill ran through him that froze the blood in his veins. This was no simple punishment for an adventurous boy. Jutsen had used young Danny Howell as a bait to bring him, Giff Byram, into a well-laid trap!

The picture came clear in a split second, each detail sharp, as when sheet-lightning cuts through a smothering storm and lifts every stick and stone into bright prominence.

Magnus Jutsen had never forgotten his beating at Giff's hands! He knew what a small spark it took to fire Giff's anger, to throw him into uncontrollable rage. And he schemed to use that wild anger to his own advantage.

He knew that Giff would come running at Danny's call. And the sight of a helpless lad strung up like a beef for slaughter would fire any man to action. But Jutsen was ready.

Could he be held to blame if one of his men had to gun down crazy-mad Giff Byram in one of his fits? Self defense. Or to protect the boss. What mattered the excuse so long as the deed was accomplished!

Giff felt the sweat start at his armpits. He was caught. At his first move, one or the other of Jutsen's men would shoot him cold. And they had no need to fear the gallows. His past record, Giff knew, stood against him.

The perfect timing of the trap left him weak, sick with the realization—he was caught with all his cash in the wallet in his shirt. Jutsen must have been planning far ahead when he spread the false word that the Happy Valley Ranchers demanded all cash for their stock. Jutsen must have been looking ahead to this moment.

As Neil Prince, the cattle buyer, had said, cash money carried no brand. If Giff died, the wallet was lost. And the ranch would be lost. Maybe it was more than rumor that Magnus Jutsen had just recently bought up the mortgage on Giff's ranch from Banker Crider! If he could scheme this far, why should he stop short of Giff's ranch that he had always wanted to own?

Pain danced through Giff's head and a red haze clouded his vision. With supreme effort of will, he dragged his right hand away from his gun. He had to appear calm, steady.

But why, he argued against himself. Why prolong the ordeal? Men like Magnus Jutsen didn't play to lose. Giff Byram was marked for the kill. If he didn't break soon and give them an excuse, Jutsen would make up one for himself.

The boy moved against the door and let out an involuntary cry of pain. Jutsen's lip curled. "Well, Byram?" he queried.

Giff's blood pounded. Tension ran through him like an electric current. The odds were only three to one. He couldn't claim gun-speed, but with the will to live—

The pound of galloping hoofs broke in on the silence. Giff whirled, blinking to clear his sight. He glimpsed a big bay saddle horse rounding the cattails, the slight figure of Clyde Howell in the saddle.

Quick relief flooded over him. With another witness, Jutsen's game was finished. There could be no killing.

But Magnus Jutsen was not yet ready to quit. He growled an order and the two gunmen, Carl Mott and Ace Lanstead, advanced on Giff from either side, guns already drawn. They forced him back against the building. Jutsen meanwhile snapped out his knife and cut the bonds that held young Danny. He dumped the boy inside the pump house and slammed the door.

Clyde Howell was riding close. As Giff backed against the wall, Clyde swung into sight at the corner. Giff yelled a warning and grabbed for his gun. And he slipped into a world of darkness.

GIFF'S FIRST conscious feeling was a great throbbing pain in his head. Then came infinite sadness, the

sick aftermath of anger. He had gone out of his head again, in spite of every effort of will. There had been a fight, he knew, a struggle and shooting—and he had lost control.

Slowly, dazedly, he opened his eyes. He was lying full length on the rough ground by the pump hose. And he gripped a heavy gun in his right hand; his gun. Fearfully he brought it in front of his eyes and checked the loads. One shot had been fired.

Sick with apprehension, he reeled to his feet. It took a minute for the nausea to leave him, for his sight to clear. And then he saw the body sprawled on the ground.

Clyde Howell! With a tortured groan, Giff stumbled to the rancher's side and dropped to his knees, a fervent prayer on his lips. Somehow, in the wild confusion, he had shot Clyde Howell. His one hasty bullet had cut down Verna's father!

Holding his breath, he felt Clyde's bloody chest. There was still a heart beat. Life held on. But the bullet had cut through the lungs. It was a slim chance. And every second counted. He tore a shirt-sleeve bandage to stop the flow of blood.

Desperately, Giff looked around for his horse, any horse. Clyde's bay had gone, but he found his sorrel behind a willow clump. There was no sign of Jutsen or his men, no sign of Danny.

Clyde Howell was too badly hurt to carry on horseback. Giff swung into the saddle and spurred for home as fast as the sorrel could cover ground. He hitched his bay team to the spring wagon and raced back across the range to Jutsen's pond and around to the pump house.

The rancher groaned feebly as Giff lifted his limp form into the shallow wagon box. But still his pulse throbbed on.

Giff pushed for home, dodging the bumps. Clyde needed a doctor, almost had to have a doctor. But that meant the whole town would know that Giff had shot his best neighbor. And the law would step in. He dared no take the risk.

After painfully slow minutes, Giff drew up to his door and carried the unconscious man into the house and to Giff's own bed. He kindled a quick fire to heat water and stripped off Clyde's sodden shirt. And his courage faded.

The wound still oozed blood, but Clyde Howell looked more dead than alive. Staring down into the wax-pale face of the man on the bed, Giff was overwhelmed by his own helplessness.

Doc Reynolds from town might still be able to save Clyde, he reasoned. Doc had the skill, the instruments, the medicines in his little black bag to revive a man. But to go after Doc meant to spread the word, to bring down the law. Giff could see all that he had hoped and worked for slipping from him—Verna, the ranch, the home they would make together, maybe even his own life or freedom. But he could delay no longer. Clyde Howell's life hung in the balance.

Hurriedly he covered the wound and tucked blankets around Clyde. Pausing only to check the stove damper, he dashed out and jumped into the spring wagon and shouted the team into a gallop.

●

The road into the little town of Lodestone seemed to stretch endlessly before him. Lather began to show on the horses' sides where the harness rubbed, but he dared not slacken his pace. Then up ahead at the crossroads he saw a pinto saddle pony and Verna Howell.

A cold shock ran through Giff that numbed him from head to foot. How could he ever face Verna? The instant she knew he had shot her father, everything would be finished between them. And she had to know. He had to tell her. But the shock to her—

She was waving to him, smiling. With a jolt of pain he realized that this could be the last time he would ever

see her smile. Unconsciously, he slowed the team.

Never had Verna Howell looked lovelier to him. She stood slender and straight, holding the pinto's reins, her soft dark hair in caressing waves against the smooth skin of her neck, her dark eyes smiling and alight. And he had to hurt her with heart breaking news.

Far better to remain silent, he considered. To let her begin now thinking ill of him, to turn her against him. Bad enough when she learned that her father lay near death, but to know that the man she planned to marry two days hence had fired the shot—the pain of it muddled his thinking.

"Verna!" he called. Her name meant "Springlike"—and to him she would always mean Spring and bursting leaf-buds and wild flowers. "Verna! I have urgent business! I can't stop!"

A trace of anxious frown touched her dark eyes.

"But Giff—surely I can help!" She swung into the saddle and galloped alongside. "Tell me, Giff, what I can do—"

At sight of Verna's anxious face so close, Giff wanted to pull up, to tell her all that had happened. More than anything in the world, he wanted to assure her that he would have given his own life rather than to have hurt her father.

But fear froze the words in his throat—fear for the effect on Verna—dread of the break that had to come. Steeling himself, he swung his whip over the team and urged them to greater speed. But all his life, he knew, he would never forget the hurt, beaten look in Verna's dark eyes as she reined up and turned away.

MAYBE, HE figured, he could get Doc Reynolds out to the house, get a report on Clyde Howell's condition, then he'd leave the team and spring wagon for Doc and he'd take his sorrel and head over the hill. He was finished in Happy Valley. If only he was certain of getting the doctor—

The town seemed busier than usual as Giff rattled down the main street, but the rigs and saddle horses made way before him. He found Doc Reynolds in his little office. The doctor must have read the desperate urgency in Giff's face, for he grabbed up his little black case and without a moment's hesitation ran out and clambered into the spring wagon.

Giff swung the team around in the street and headed home at a gallop, ignoring the quick, anxious calls of the townspeople. He had found the doctor without trouble. Luck was running his way. If Clyde Howell still lived when they reached him—

The more he considered it, the more certain he became that he would leave the valley. He could leave money for Doc.

Thinking of money, Giff remembered the fat wallet in his shirt and felt for the comforting bulge. It was gone!

A black wave of anger swept over him that threatened to engulf him, to tear through his sanity. He fought for control, to keep his grip on the reins with hands that shook like willow twigs in a storm.

"Steady there!" he heard Doc's voice. "What ails you, man?"

Giff set his jaw, forced himself to shake his head slowly.

"Nothing—just nervous," he explained lamely. "We'll be home in another mile or two—"

He braced his feet and settled back in the seat, but the little doctor continued to watch him furtively. He, too, had heard of Giff Byram's wild temper.

Giff steadied the reins and felt again for the wallet to be sure. It was no longer in his shirt. So Magnus Jutsen had made good his play! He had even improved on his original scheme. Instead of killing Giff, he had tricked Giff into shooting Clyde Howell,—into becoming an outlaw. And while

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Giff had been blacked out, he had lifted the money he was after. The man had more than succeeded!

Again Giff had to get a grip on his temper, and forced himself to hold steady. What did money matter now, he asked himself. He was through, finished. He had only to try to save Clyde Howell.

He thought for a moment that he saw Verna's pinto in a willow thicket as he passed. But his eyes must have tricked him, he figured. He saw nothing more of her. And then they were bounding into the door yard of his ranch house.

•

Doc Reynolds took one look at the wounded man and jerked off his coat. He rolled up his sleeves and started to work with no wasted motion. His little black case supplied everything from probes to stimulants.

Giff hurried into the kitchen and fired up the stove again and set water to heating. He was starting for the well outside to refill the water bucket when the pinto pounded to a stop in the yard and Verna came running into the house.

She took one look at Giff's face and dashed on into the bedroom. Giff started after her, but hesitated. Pain lanced through him at her sharp cry of anguish when she saw her father. Then a few brief words in the doctor's gruff voice and she came stumbling out of the room and into Giff's arms.

"Why didn't you tell me, Giff!" she cried. "Why—"

"I couldn't—" Giff pleaded. "I shot him—"

Verna started back, wide-eyed. "No, Giff! You couldn't!"

Giff nodded slowly. "I don't know how, but I did!" And briefly, never sparing himself, he told Verna of the trap he had walked into at Magnus Jutsen's pump house.

"But you never meant to shoot

[*Turn To Page* 118]

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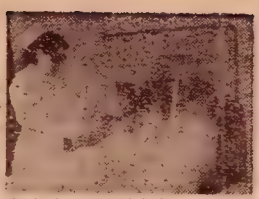

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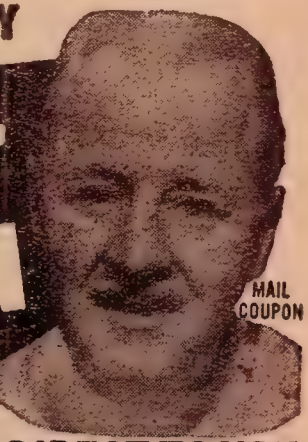

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Dad!" she cried, grasping his arms. "You didn't even know you did it! Giff—don't turn away from me again, ever. Whatever happens, I have faith in you, Giff. I love you—"

Giff felt a slow warmth welling up in him, like life returning. He reached to take Verna in his arms. "Verna—"

But the doctor had stepped into the doorway. Both Giff and Verna whirled to meet him. Doc Reynolds nodded quickly.

"I've seen men worse shot up than he is," the doctor said, "and they still recovered. Give him half a chance and he'll pull through." He turned and went back to his patient.

Verna sobbed with relief in Giff's arms. But suddenly she stiffened. "I forgot Danny!" she cried. "He never came home!"

Giff's jaw set. He, too, had forgotten Danny. The boy had not been in the pump house after the shooting. Jutsen must have taken him away. "I'm going after Danny!" he promised.

But the sound of hard-ridden horses filled the yard. He ducked to a window. Six or seven men had reined up outside. Giff recognized Sheriff Ben Logan, young rancher Jim Smith, curly-headed Neil Prince, the cattle buyer. "Get back, Giff!" Verna cried. "They might try to arrest you. Get out the back door—"

Giff hesitated. If he ran from the law—

"Please, Giff!" Verna begged. "If—if Daddy dies— Oh, Giff! I can't bear to lose you, too—" With sudden resolution she ducked out the front door and pulled it shut behind her.

Giff heard Ben Logan's voice: "Mag Jutsen sent us word that Giff Byram had shot a man on his place. We've come for Byram—"

SO JUTSEN had sent for the sheriff! Giff felt the hot blood rush to his head. All his worry about calling a doctor for nothing!

Giff made a quick decision. Jutsen still had Danny. So he would go after

the boy. Now was no time to run away from the law, he knew. He'd be playing into Jutsen's hands. But he couldn't risk delay. Quietly he slipped out through the back door and ducked for the stable. A shed kept him hidden from the men in front of the house. And a shallow gulley back of the barn made a getaway possible. He checked the loads in his gun as he circled wide around the field and headed for Jutsen's ranch.

But his caution came to nothing. Before he had covered half the distance, he looked back and found the posse behind him. Cold sweat burst out on his brow. But he kept on, crowding the sorrel. When he had found Danny, he would decide his next move.

The Jutsen ranch buildings appeared deserted as he rode up. He scanned the layout quickly. A combination tool shed and grain storage bin looked to be the most likely place for a lock-up. And it had the hasp securely pegged over the staple.

Giff swung from the saddle and tore open the shed door.

"Danny!" he called softly. "Danny—it's me— Giff!"

He held his breath, waiting. There was a slight rattle of sound and young Danny Howell stumbled out into the light, his eyes red and swollen. Giff breathed again. Luck still sided him.

He reached to catch the boy, but a sound from behind him spun him around. Magnus Jutsen stood in the stable doorway with a six-gun level in his grip.

"This time—" Jutsen g r o w l e d. "This time—"

By the brutal set of his dark face, Giff knew the rancher would shoot, that this time he would not trust to blind chance. Jutsen couldn't afford to wait.

But the sound of the approaching posse reached his ears and jerked his head around. At the same instant, Carl Mott stepped from the corner of the stable, gun in hand, and barked a

[*Turn Page*]

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question, pointing to the coming riders.

Giff could read the indecision in Jutsen's eyes. The rancher could not gun Giff down now in cold blood and leave Danny for a witness. And he dared not risk two killings. The tension eased out of him.

"Get over against the wall," Jutsen ordered. "Hands high!"

The sheriff's party already thundered into the yard, and Sheriff Ben Logan flung himself from his horse.

"Put up your guns!" he called to Jutsen and Carl Mott. "I'll see to this man!" He turned on Giff. "I'm arresting you, Giff Byram, for the shooting of Clyde Howell—"

But Verna's pinto lashed into the scene, and the girl was out of the saddle and in front of Sheriff Logan.

"Sheriff—it was all an accident Giff never knew—"

Danny's thin voice, shrill with grief and anger, cut in. "Giff never shot my dad! It was—" He pointed a shaking finger at Carl Mott, "that man! I saw him—I got the pump house door open, I saw him hit Giff over the head with his gun barrel. Then he took Giff's gun and shot it into the ground—"

All eyes went to Carl Mott and the man turned pasty white.

"I never shot Howell," Mott begged. "It was Ace that done it. I never shot—"

Jutsen growled an oath, and Ace Lanstead stepped into sight from behind the tool shed. Even as the crowd saw the gun in his hand, the gunman fired and Carl Mott stiffened in death.

Sheriff Logan drew as he whirled, and he fired twice. Out of the corner of his eye, Giff saw Ace Lanstead fall, but Giff was watching Magnus Jutsen. Behind the sheriff, Jutsen had reached for his gun.

Giff grabbed for his own weapon, desperation speeding his hand. There was Verna and Danny to be in the way of Jutsen's bullets if the man had a chance to shoot. He had to be stopped.

Giff swung up and fired. And he caught Jutsen dead center. But the

dark rancher clung to life, tried to lift his gun. At last his thumb slipped from the hammer and the bullet tore the gound between the sheriff's feet.

SHERIFF Logan watched the man fall and unconsciously drew the back of his hand across his brow. He turned to Giff.

"That was close! Much obliged, Giff! And now maybe you can tell me what this is all about!"

Giff shook his head. "I guess it's just the way Danny said—"

"But what's back of it? How did it start?"

"It was all a shrewd scheme to take my bankroll," Giff explained. And he told of the trap set for him at the pump house and the way it turned out, while Verna comforted Danny with the doctor's good report.

"If you'll check on Jutsen," Giff added, "I think you'll find my money!"

Neil Prince stepped forward. "I can identify the amount," he offered, "that I paid Giff for his steers."

The sheriff made a quick search of the rancher's pockets and came up with Giff's still-stuffed wallet. "Not much doubt about the ownership of this!" he agreed, handing it over.

Giff thanked the sheriff and tucked the wallet into his shirt. He turned to find Danny and Verna both crowded close. Danny stood beaming up at him, while Verna gripped both his hands, tears glistening in her dark eyes.

"Giff!" she cried. "I'm so glad it wasn't you who shot Dad!"

Giff shook his head, and the old grin came back to his face. He hadn't fired the shot that struck Clyde Howell. He hadn't even blacked out. It was Mott's gun barrel that had given him the headache and the lump he could still feel above his ear.

Best of all, he hadn't lost his temper. He and Verna could face a future bright and unshadowed.

"Why," he said with sudden realization, "all this shootin' just now—and I never even got mad!"

Gratefully, he caught Verna in his arms.

★

KNOW YOUR INDIANS

(*continued from page 8*)

at a distance of seven or eight feet.

WE OFTEN read of the plains Indians throwing a tomahawk at an enemy with deadly accuracy while at a full gallop. This is pure fiction, for no man—white or red and no matter how skillful—can throw a hatchet—or even a knife—with accuracy when mounted and in motion.

In order to hit his mark with the blade, the thrower must know the exact distance of his target, for a variation of even three feet will make all the difference between a weapon striking blade-on or handle-on. Every thrown weapon makes a certain number of turns in a certain distance. In fact the art or skill in knife or hatchet throwing depends very largely upon the thrower's ability to judge distance accurately—which is manifestly impossible when a man is charging forward on horseback or afoot.

Another fallacy that so frequently occurs in tales of Indians is that a skilled tracker could always identify the tribe of an Indian by the imprints of his moccasins. Many of our eastern and middle-western Indian tribes used soft buckskin or moosehide moccasins, and while each tribe had its own particular method of fitting the tongue to the uppers, the imprint would be that of the wearer's foot with no indication of how the moccasins were made. The majority of the eastern and central tribes gathered or puckered the uppers to the tongue, and while the latter might be narrow, broad, oval or wedge-shaped, the imprint left by the wearer would be the same. Even the Seminole moccasin, which is a very dis-

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tinctive and unique type without a tongue but with the two sides of the uppers gathered together over the instep, leaves an imprint of the wearer's foot exactly like that of a man wearing a Tarantine, an Iroquois, or a Delaware moccassin. There are, however, certain types of soft moccasins that *do* leave identifiable imprints, such as those of the Quapaws, which have a seam along the sole. With the plains Indians' moccasins it was a different matter, for while—with one or two exceptions—all were made with thick rawhide or *parfleche* soles and soft buckskin uppers, the shape of the soles varied with the different tribes.

Also, a skilled tracker, familiar with the moccasins used by the various so-called Apache tribes, the Comanches, Kiowas and others, *could* usually identify the tribe of an Idian by his moccasin-tracks, for most of these desert Indians used moccasins of rawhide that did not conform to the shape of the wearer's feet, as did the soft buckskin footgear of the woodland tribes.

Very much the same is the truth about the Indians' head-dresses. Certain tribes *did* have distinctive feather head-dresses, or wore their hair or the feather-plumes in a certain easily-recognized manner. For example, the like tufts of hair of the Pawnees, which gave the tribe its name of *"Piriki"* or "Little horns"; or the queue and drooping feather plume of the Blackfoot brave, or the low, diagonally-placed plume of the Cheyennes were unmistakeable means of identification; but on the other hand, each of the various tribes also wore a great many forms of elaborate head-dresses. Although the "bonnet" of the Blackfeet, with its vertical feathers was very different from the bonnets of the Sioux and Cheyennes—with the feathers lying almost flat over the head—yet, for certain ceremonies and under certain conditions, a Blackfoot might wear the Sioux type of head-dress or *vice versa*.

In fact, the types and designs of

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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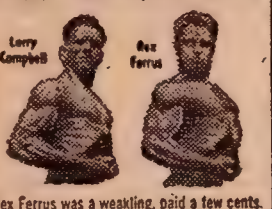

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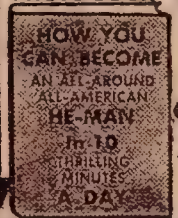

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head-dresses were innumerable, for special forms were required for the various ceremonials, dances, etc. Some were symbolical; others told those "in the know" of the brave or noteworthy deeds of the wearer; others denoted rank or social status; others were clan or "medicine" head-dresses—and in addition to all of these, the individual taste of the maker resulted in endless forms and variations of head-gear and hair-dos. It seems to be a popular idea that the larger and more spectacular the Indian's feather head-dress, the more important and famous the wearer. This, however, is not the case. Many of the most showy "war bonnets" with double tails and hundreds of feathers are purely ornamental; whereas, on the other hand, one or two eagle feathers with "coup" marks may identify the wearer as a doer of brave deeds, a mighty warrior or a high ranking chieftan. And if we see a "war bonnet" with its plumes tipped with smaller "coup" feathers, or notched in a certain manner, we may be sure the wearer is a veteran of many battles and a mighty man in the land. To the Indian, the "coup marks" are like the service-ribbons or buttons to the white soldier. And just as those who know the significance of the veteran's multicolored ribbons, so the Indian reads in the "coup" marks the story of the wearer's deeds. Very often "coups" may be recorded by feathers attached to lances, war-clubs, shields, or more frequently to "coup-sticks" which resemble shepherds' crooks in form.

I have a coup-stick, that belonged to Crazy Horse, that is completely covered with prime mink skins and bears eleven "coup" feathers won in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Very often both head-dresses, coup sticks, and other objects were decorated with scalps; but to the plains Indians the scalp itself was less important than the "coup", or first to touch a dead or wounded enemy; for once a foe was touched by "coup" he was considered

dead, and was treated as if non-existent. The scalp once taken, dried and displayed, was of little value other than as an ornament, or to be used in fringes for garments. In fact, among most of the western tribes, taking the scalp was more of an act of vengeance or retribution, than of obtaining a souvenir—each scalp being regarded as payment for the death of a tribesman of the taker. In somewhat the same manner, the so-called "scalp dance" was not in reality a "dance" celebrating the taking of scalps, but a chant or dirge of mourning for members of the tribe lost in battle, and with the participants standing almost motionless.

ANOTHER matter regarding which there is a deal of popular misconception is the so-called "peace pipe". The true peace pipe or Calumet was a very symbolical, elaborate affair with both a male and a female pipe, only brought forth from their wrappings on momentous occasions, and so surrounded by symbolism and ceremonies that they are incomprehensible to the average white man. The ordinary, commonly called "peace" pipe had merely a friendly or companionable meaning and was smoked on practically on all occasions of councils, discussions, or with visitors. On such occasions tobacco was used, the Indians regarding the tobacco as a sacred gift from the Great Spirit whereas on ordinary occasions—or when smoking for pleasure—the Indians used various other substances. such as red willowbark, or dried leaves, sometimes with a little tobacco added.

Although we usually think of the Indians' musical instruments consisting of drums and rattles only, they also had numerous forms of fifes flutes, whistles, trumpets, etc. However, the drums and rattles were the most important, as they were particularly adapted to the Indians' types of dancing-music and ceremonies. Each

[*Turn Page*]

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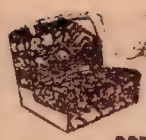

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tribe had its own favorite, or popular, type of drum, and, in addition, each had a number of forms of drums—each designed for a certain purpose. There were deep, slender drums; short, broad drums; drums with double heads, and those with single heads. Many had the heads attached permanently to the barrel, while others had devices for tightening the head.

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ALTHOUGH most persons visualize an Indian's home as a conical "wigwam" of bark, or a "tipi" of

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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skins, the Indians used a great many other kinds of houses. Many of our eastern tribes lived in well-built log houses, usually banked with dead leaves, grass, etc., during the winter. Some made huts of stones and clay and many used houses of bark slabs lashed or sewn to a framework of poles. The form varied, some being cylindrical and dome-roofed, others rectangular with an arched roof and others with gabled roofs. The Indians of the Middle West also used permanent houses of wood, thatch or other material that were rectangular in form, as well as sod houses. The nomadic plains tribes were partial to the conventional tipi, for it was readily set up or taken down; it could be transported easily from place to place; it was commodious, comfortable, and weatherproof, even in the most severe winter weather. However, tipis were not universally used by all the far western tribes. The Navajos, and some of the other desert tribes of the Southwest, dwelt in partially dug-out homes with an "upper story" of timbers covered with sods.

The Pueblos, of course, had their adobe dwellings and quite a number of tribes used regular sod huts. In fact there was almost as much diversity among Indians' homes as among Indian weapons, moccasins or other artifacts.

Although to a person "not in the know", as we might say, a Sioux in full costume might be indistinguishable from a Blackfoot, an Arapaho, a Pawnee; or a Crow, a Ute, a Cheyenne, or any one of a dozen plains tribes, yet to another Indian, or to a person familiar with the Indians, there would be certain details of dress that would instantly identify the tribe of the wearer. The cut of the garments, the length and type of fringes, the style of breech-cloth and, perhaps most important of all, the type and designs of the ornamental bead and quill ornamentation.

The Sioux for example, used geometrical patterns almost exclusively,

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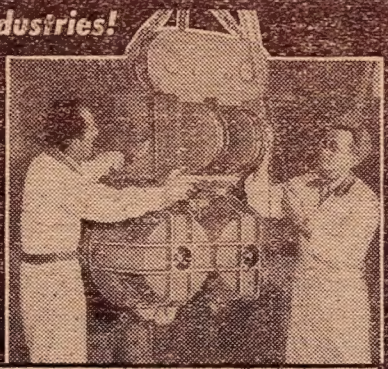

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although these were often worked into conventionalized but recognizable figures of men, women, birds, various beasts, mountains, trees, and other natural objects. The Blackfeet, Cheyennes and most of the other plains tribes were also partial to geometrical forms of beadwork but often combined these with curves, scrolls, or semi-floral designs; the Utes were fond of broad bands of beadwork, the Sans Arcs combined floral patterns with squares, straight lines and geometrical figures, star-shaped designs and rosettes of curved lines and semi-circles.

The Arikaras were partial to long lines and elongated rectangles of solid colors. Many of the Assiniboin beadwork designs were composed of circles. The Pottawattomies, Menonimes, Chippewas, and neighboring tribes, employed unmistakable elaborate designs of involved geometrical figures totally unlike those of the plains tribes. Most of the tribes of the Midwest—the Osages, Kansas, Sauks and Foxes, Shawnees, and Winnebagos—preferred floral designs sometimes combined with a few geometrical figures, while practically all of the eastern tribes used floral designs exclusively. Which tribe made the best and most beautiful beadwork is perhaps a matter of personal taste and opinion. However, much depended upon the women who did the beadwork. Some were far more skillful than others; some had a better artistic taste for color combinations and designs; but taken all in all, I should say that the most beautiful and elaborate beadwork was that of the Shoshones. Very often a man's or woman's costume would be so completely covered with elaborate beadwork that it weighed as much as a heavy winter overcoat; and not infrequently a Shoshone's pony would be covered from head to tail—with head included—with fringed buckskin, every square inch of which was decorated with magnificent beadwork. In former times all beads were sewed on with sinew and in the finest work each bead was sewn on separately. As a rule, however, several beads were threaded and sewn on at a time. Even in their loom bead work the women or men (for many of the men did some of the best loom work) used sinews or horsehair. But today what beadwork is done—mainly to sell to tourists—is usually made on thread. Very often it is carelessly made with the "lazy squaw" stitch, and is a very poor imitation of the beautiful work with which the Indians decorated their garments in the past.

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